

ESRC Science in Society Programme

**Annual researchers' meeting
9th November 2005
Royal Society, London**

This year's annual meeting was designed to address the issues surrounding the legacy of the Programme, and to facilitate the start of the discussion about the themes that are emerging from the projects and how these might be taken forward by the Programme directorate.

Steve Rayner opened the proceedings by tracing the development of the Programme from its initial inception following the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee report of 2000 and the drivers that had prompted the ESRC to develop the programme, including concerns around trust and the governance of science. He introduced the themes that, in the light of the Programme's history, he saw as being major factors in both an academic and a social policy sense. These themes proved to be a major talking point during the day, and allowed for a discussion of what researchers considered to be the main 'messages' emerging from their work. The themes identified by Steve as being of concern in a large number of projects were:

- Technological novelty
- Governance and accountability
- Public participation and democracy
- Scientific connoisseurship

and he talked through the reasons why these themes might constitute the overriding 'message' from the Programme.

Chris Caswill then talked to the meeting about his experiences during his time as the Director of Research at the ESRC and the way in which programmes might be most effective in their dissemination activity and communication with users of research. He suggested that in many situations, the most appropriate method of ensuring the legacy of work of a programme was for projects to work together after the formal end of the programme. This could be a continuation of the web site, maintaining interest in specific research themes through joint meetings and seminars or workshops, or an extension to the programme, perhaps through a fellowship for the Director. He reminded everyone that there was life after the ESRC and that it was important to think creatively about the options open for continuing communication after funding has ceased. Especially important for moving forward was developing an appreciation of the Programme's function, and how the aspects identified as being of importance in the Programme might be sustained.

Alister Scott then addressed the meeting from the perspective of having been Assistant Director on the ESRC's Global Environmental Change Programme, a large ten year programme which finished in 2000. He began with a reminder that it was important to put research into its context and to remember when communicating results to users and publics that they are more concerned with broad brush-strokes than the detail of research. Over-arching messages should be emphasised to bring attention to work that has been done, including through the press, where it is possible to influence the policy-makers in

Westminster. The GEC programme did this successfully through its series of briefings. He told the meeting that academics are a good source of independent comment and that they should concentrate on this as their strength.

Discussion items

The researchers were then asked to move into one of three groups to discuss questions that had been posed by the Programme office. These were:

1. What are we learning, both in terms of content and process? What is surprising and useful, and how does it compare with our expectations, or the expectations of funders/policy makers/industry etc? How do we fine-tune the rest of the programme to home in on the areas where we are making advances in understanding? Can we map our expectations versus the actual learning we have made (a kind of mind-map of the field)?
2. How do we communicate what we are learning, both now, and after the end of the programme? How has our work already been received and how has it made an impact? What modes of communication are the most effective? Who is most receptive to our message? Who are the friends and champions of the programme? What would be the key themes of our communication?
3. How do we ensure that the findings of the programme are adopted and applied? What are the key policy implications of what has been learned so far? How do they compare to the views and beliefs currently shaping policy? Which are the policy and decision-making areas that the findings are most relevant to? Which organisations/agencies are responsible for these policy areas, and who are the stakeholders and gatekeepers? What needs to be done to act on this analysis?

Each group was asked to consider all three questions, but with emphasis on one of them to ensure all three were evenly considered. Groups were each allocated a facilitator to assist with this task and were asked to report back after lunch.

Group A

Beth Perry (Salford) acted as rapporteur for Group A, which had questioned the themes that Steve Rayner had touched on in his introductory presentation. Members of the group felt that these themes were not cross-cutting enough to be representative of all the work that was taking place across the whole range of projects. They also felt that it would be more helpful to work on something broader than these themes, for example working collectively on academic output. The group thought that the notion of a Programme fellow, which had been suggested some time ago, would have been the ideal way to ensure some academic coherence between the projects and to allow for synthesis between them to take place both more proactively and effectively. The group was not sure what the commonalities were between the projects or even if they were all at a point at which it would be possible to consider overarching themes. It did feel, however, that the Programme had a lot to offer and that members of the Programme community should be encouraged to make use of the website and the maillist again. It was widely agreed that there needed to be reminders to send messages to the maillist and to update the Programme office when press releases were sent out or when news emerged from projects.

The group noted that the ESRC's approach to evaluations did not acknowledge the impact created by working with stakeholders. The message to the ESRC must be that evaluation on strictly academic grounds does not evaluate all aspects of a project and is therefore inaccurate and misleading. Not enough credit is given to developing material that is policy relevant and, although the group noted that the Programme is aware of this and has brought

it up with the ESRC before, it remains a problem of significant proportions that urgently needs to be addressed.

The group agreed that it would be helpful if the Programme office could organise thematic workshops to allow subsets of the research community to focus clearly on one particular aspect of the Programme. It was recognized that time was an issue for many researchers, whose commitments were wide-ranging and who needed to prioritise the work that they undertook.

It was also suggested that the Programme themes should focus primarily on the audiences the Programme is targeting and not necessarily reflect any specific academic 'fit' or disciplinary/methodological similarities across projects. Whatever the reasoning, it would be important to make chosen themes work across projects and this might best be achieved by small group work.

Group B

Andrew Barry (Goldsmiths College) acted as rapporteur for the second group, which considered the wider learning points for the Programme and noted the need to address the bigger questions so that they can be brought together in an appropriate way. The Programme does not have a simple story to tell, on the contrary it is rather complex. The importance of communicating research was discussed, with the debate focusing on the use and importance of developing links with users of research. One person suggested that the communication of research was not the responsibility of the individual academic but something that was in the hands of the research councils and their networks. It was felt that a figure was needed who would move all the research in one direction, a suggestion that had been brought up earlier in the session as well as earlier in the life of the Programme, when a potential research fellow to work across the Programme had been mooted as a possibility. More dialogue across projects would be helpful, as there was a feeling that no-one really knew what anyone else was doing, and this particularly affected researchers who had joined the Programme in the final phase of funding. The group felt that the 'added value' of the Programme needed to be established in order to determine the real role of the Programme for the individual projects within it. This in turn would allow public engagement to include the real synthesis of the Programme's results and insights, which would not have to be answers *per se* but perhaps a reframing of issues, querying of existing positions and producing capacity to address problems. As well as this notion, it was suggested that a collective approach to synthesis might be appropriate, whereby researchers could work together on their output. Unfortunately, this concept had already been raised with the ESRC in an early version of the Programme's communication plan, and the Council had decided that this would not fulfil their reporting and outcome requirements adequately.

The importance of blue skies research was noted, as was the importance of maintaining the level of academic excellence that UK HEIs expect of their staff. Nevertheless, it was noted that the potential exists for social science research to have a huge effect on public policy development and that this must be pursued wherever possible, especially through the links with the increasing number of science and society sections in learned institutions. Creating links with institutions concerned with communication of science will enable academics to learn from each others' experiences of communication and engagement and about the different communities and their understandings of and reactions to science and policy. It was noted that it was not just the social sciences that have difficulty with the notion of science in society and that joint research council activity might be the most appropriate way to move on after the end of the Programme. The group agreed that in terms of impact, the viability of this approach depends on the politicisation of the research as well as the timescale over which any impact can be expected. The group felt that impact was frequently expected either too quickly during the lifetime of an award or too quickly after it had ended. It agreed, however, that the ESRC expected that awards would have public policy relevance and that it was not

necessarily appropriate to conclude research with simply a call for more research in any given area.

The group noted that public dissemination of results was not always the best thing to do with work undertaken and that more care needed to be given to the use of results which were unwelcome or unhelpful to policy makers. The group also commented that the process by which policy is produced is politicised but not closed and that it is not centred on politicians but rather on field-level bureaucrats, who should be the real targets of the Programme's work. There are multiple publics for the Programme and each group requires a different approach.

Group C

Nick Pidgeon was rapporteur for this group, which had discussed the possibility of coming up with 'answers' for the Programme and had concluded that it was not necessarily possible to do that. It may be that projects actually demonstrate a problem-solving capacity rather than an answer-providing capacity and in that way it was felt that it would be appropriate for the research councils to work together to channel interdisciplinary research activity in particular directions. The group also felt that a key role of the Programme was in mentoring the projects and that it might have been useful for project researchers to have shared their experiences with other researchers before their projects began. That way the reception of findings might have been better considered across the board. The group therefore felt that they were not aware enough of the other work going on in other projects and that they could have benefited from the opportunity to talk to more experienced Programme members before beginning their own awards.

The group called for synthesis of research results across the Programme to identify not just emerging themes, but also opportunities to work with each other outside their projects and possibly the Programme as well.

Responses and discussion

Steve Rayner responded to some of the points made during the discussion. In particular, he noted that evaluations were problematic and that this was of concern for the Programme and had been for some time. Making progress on this issue was very difficult, however, partly because of the structure of the ESRC and partly because of lack of interest in change at the ESRC.

The issue of a research fellow had been broached in the first phase of the Programme but had not been taken further. Nevertheless, plans were in place with the ESRC for the appointment of an academic consultant who would work with projects to produce pamphlets that would synthesise the work and results of projects. More detail would be provided by the Programme office in due course.

The research community was invited to maintain contact with the Programme office as often as possible and to let the office know about publications, conferences and other activity as it happened, there being no reason to wait for the notification of the annual report to send in details of project activity.

Steve also queried the interpretation of research findings that had been used during the discussion. His view of what constituted 'findings' was less precise than that used by some during the discussion, and he wished to support the definition used by others in the discussion, who had included the problematisation of issues, reframing of issues and insights from the work undertaken.

He also highlighted the news that the ESRC was to increase the funding for responsive mode grants, which will allow more collaborative work across disciplines and institutions to take place, to some extent in the form of a mini-programme.

Other comments made during the discussion included

- the added value of programmes was not immediately apparent and that it was a good idea to phase them out as a stream of funding
- the 'hands off' approach of the Director has its good and bad points: it was not interventionist, but might miss opportunities to bring people together as a result
- it is difficult to know what incentives the Programme has to offer to encourage already stretched staff to commit further time and effort to additional work
- it would help to consider how researchers could contribute to the development of new ideas
- a research consultant in the Director's office might usefully co-ordinate the research synthesis that had been discussed
- the Programme is no longer a 'central bank' and needs to be thought of as an enabler of learning and a marketer of research findings
- need to ensure that the problems being studied by research community are not replicated in the environment of the Programme
- if the researchers have an idea about how the Programme could usefully support research activity, get in touch with the Programme office to discuss it. Imaginative communication and dissemination activity would be supported through the Programme's communication budget.
- PIPES should not be forgotten as a way of using central funds to further Programme and project aims. Information is usually in e-mails sent out by Steve or from the Programme office on request.
- incentives are important – the Programme is not everyone's life!

The meeting closed with the agreement that the Programme office would summarise the discussion and report back to the research community with a list of action points to take forward for the remainder of the Programme.

Action points

- Have a period of open consultation so that all members of the research community can air their views about
 - which of the emerging themes of the Programme should be emphasised
 - any views about other themes that should be included
 - how the Programme might encourage researchers to discover more about each other's work
 - incentives that the Director might offer researchers to become more involved in the Programme.
- Organise meetings to enable members of the research community to develop the synthesis of work that has taken place in each area and to elaborate on key ideas.
- Move forward with the thematic research output brochures planned with the ESRC.
- Remind members of the community that they can use the maillist and that there are communication funds available through the Programme office. Details can be sought from Anne-Marie at any time.