



House of Commons  
Science and Technology  
Committee

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**The Work of the  
Economic and Social  
Research Council:  
Government Response  
to the Committee's  
First Report of Session  
2004-05**

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**Fifth Special Report of Session 2004–05**

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## The Science and Technology Committee

The Science and Technology Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Office of Science and Technology and its associated public bodies.

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A list of Reports from the Committee in the present Parliament is included at the back of this volume.

### Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are: Chris Shaw (Clerk); Emily Commander (Second Clerk); Alun Roberts (Committee Specialist); Hayaatun Sillem (Committee Specialist); Ana Ferreira (Committee Assistant); Robert Long (Senior Office Clerk); and Christine McGrane (Committee Secretary).

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# Fifth Special Report

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On 20 December 2004 the Science and Technology Committee published its First Report of Session 2004–05, *The Work of the Economic and Social Research Council*. On 25 February 2005 the Committee received a memorandum from the Government which contained a response to the Report. The memorandum is published without comment as an appendix to this Report.

## Government Response

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### Introduction

The Office of Science and Technology (OST) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) welcome the report and its conclusion that ESRC is a well-run Research Council. A number of the recommendations made in the report were already under consideration by the ESRC. However, the implementation of some of these will depend on the outcome of the Spending Review allocations and on decisions to be made by the ESRC Council in April 2005. The Government notes that Research Councils UK (RCUK) will look at the recommendations from the Committee's reports on the work of all the Research Councils and consider the opportunities for the further sharing of ideas and best practice between Councils.

The Government's response to the Committee's individual recommendations is set out below. Where recommendations were plainly addressed to the ESRC and the Government has no role in the matters raised, the response is the ESRC's.

### Strategy and Mission

**1. The positive feedback from the social science community about the way in which ESRC conducted the consultation on its new strategic framework is a credit to the Council. ESRC needs to build on this good work by continuing to engage with its community in its forward planning. (Paragraph 11)**

The Government welcomes the Committee's recognition of the value of ESRC's consultation. ESRC intend to conduct regular consultation exercises on a similar basis in future.

**2. It is encouraging that ESRC is building strong relationships with a wide range of Government Departments. We believe that this interaction should strengthen the quality of policy making in these Departments. We nevertheless urge ESRC to exercise caution to ensure that its work programme does not become overly focused on meeting Government priorities at the expense of giving researchers with strong proposals the freedom to pursue issues that they believe are important. (Paragraph 15)**

ESRC will continue to strive to maintain a balance between funding work of national priority and being responsive to opportunities for driving forward science and knowledge, including the priorities of the academic community. However, these two categories are, of

course, not mutually exclusive and there is high demand for funding through those directed programmes that address policy issues and responsive mode. ESRC would also argue that none of the research it funds is solely about 'meeting government priorities'. Much of it is indeed concerned with addressing key policy areas but that is always underpinned by high scientific quality.

The Government agrees that access to scientific evidence for policy making is very important in contributing to the development of policy by Government Departments. Government Departments also conduct and commission social and economic research and seek to ensure that there is no duplication with the research commissioned by others.

**3. In view of ESRC's interest in, and the Government's stated commitment to, evidence-based policy making we believe that there would be significant merit in ESRC conducting periodic appraisals of the extent to which specific Government policies in areas within ESRC's remit are based on sound evidence. This would remind Government of its commitment to evidence-based policy making and would also be a useful indicator of the relevance and value of ESRC-sponsored research. (Paragraph 16)**

The Chief Scientific Advisor has been carrying out assessments of the science and innovation strategies of Government Departments to ensure that they meet the needs of evidence-based policy. In the light of this work we do not think it would be productive to ask the ESRC to duplicate it.

**4. We encourage ESRC to ensure that research of relevance is disseminated widely to the Regional Development Agencies and advise Regional Development Agencies to make more use of ESRC expertise in planning and conducting research to underpin policy making. (Paragraph 17)**

The ESRC has already begun to strengthen links with the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). An example of the increased interaction with regional bodies is the conference that ESRC held in November in association with the Association of Regional Observatories on 'Regional Policy', which was attended by 200 delegates from RDAs, central and local government and other key policymakers, and on which positive feedback was received. ESRC is now developing further activity that builds on the success of the conference and provides the research evidence and knowledge that inform the regions and brings together those developing policy at both national and regional levels.

Government policy requires the RDAs to develop a strong evidence base for their policies and plans, from whatever appropriate source. Where ESRC commissioned research anticipates and reflects the needs of the RDAs, and is thus relevant, timely and appropriately disseminated, then it should be taken into account. This will be reflected in revised Guidance to the RDAs on the Regional Economic Strategies which the Government will issue shortly. This underlines the need for a comprehensive and high quality evidence base to underpin the RES. It also draws attention to the need to work closely with Government departments, agencies and NDPBs, including making effective use of relevant national resources and sources of evidence.

**5. ESRC has a remit to fund a broad portfolio of research and to support UK researchers in carrying out work of world standing and relevance. We therefore**

**welcome ESRC's increasing willingness to fund social science of global rather than just European significance. (Paragraph 19)**

ESRC has always been committed to funding work with a global non-European focus but acknowledges that it needs to ensure that this is made more explicit. ESRC expects to announce shortly a jointly-funded responsive mode scheme with the Department for International Development (DFID), which would be administered by ESRC but would be in DFID's areas of interest. We hope that this will enhance the global impact of UK social science research on development through new work in this area. ESRC is also actively pursuing possible collaborations with other European and non-European partners which would enable teams of researchers in different countries to apply for funding.

## Support for Research

**6. ESRC's 2:1 ratio of directed: responsive mode funding is out of step with other Research Councils and is unpopular with its research community. We recommend that ESRC respond without delay to the calls from its community to increase significantly the proportion of responsive mode funding (Paragraph 21)**

ESRC is presently considering, in the context of developing its Delivery Plan 2005–08, an increase in the proportion of funding for responsive mode schemes. ESRC does not regard the directed and responsive modes as separate silos but as part of a spectrum of funding opportunities. For instance, most of ESRC's research programmes are responsive competitions within a broadly defined subject area and the research centres competition this year was open to proposals in any area of social science. In addition, the categorisation of responsive and directed mode awards is not the same across all Councils and thus a direct comparison of the ratio of spend is difficult to carry out.

**7. ESRC should increase the funding available for responsive mode applications by reducing the size of its contingent of Research Centres. In addition, ESRC needs to consider whether a shorter time frame, such as five years, for Research Centre funding would give better value for money. (Paragraph 26)**

ESRC will consider this within the context of its overall portfolio rather than just focusing on centres. However, centres are designed to achieve specific objectives and research outcomes which arise from large-scale, long-term funding and could not be so easily achieved through alternative mechanisms. ESRC regard Research Centres as providing excellent value for money, not only in producing high quality research output, but also in playing a significant role in meeting other ESRC objectives in training researchers and dissemination/transfer of knowledge. A shorter time period would take away the career development opportunities which the Centres offer. It might also reduce the impact these have on both scientific development and contributions to policy, in such areas as social exclusion, demographic and social change, public expenditure policy, economic performance, economic behaviour, globalisation, and innovation; all of which require long term study. We would highlight, for example, the contribution of the "Centre for Economic Performance" to Government thinking about productivity and that of the "Centre for Business Research" on the functioning of the firm.

**8. We are pleased to find that ESRC is attempting to tackle the low success rates for responsive mode grant applications by managing demand and improving the quality of applications. ESRC must now significantly enhance the funding available for responsive mode grants. Until it does so, overall success rates are unlikely to improve significantly. (Paragraph 29)**

ESRC welcomes the Committee's recognition of the efforts it is making to tackle low success rates. But see also response to Recommendation 6 above.

**9. It is not sufficient that ESRC is content with its procedures for assessing interdisciplinary applications: the research community must also be convinced that these applications will be given proper consideration. If this does not happen, the perceived lack of a level playing field will act as a disincentive for researchers to submit interdisciplinary applications, or indeed to engage in interdisciplinary research. (Paragraph 31)**

ESRC is committed to communicating its policies widely throughout the research community so as to ensure it minimises any misperceptions. ESRC is increasingly encouraging researchers to engage in interdisciplinary work, particularly through the range of cross-Council initiatives developed in the last few years. ESRC's Research Grants Board is also considering how it can stimulate and support further responsive-mode research which straddles scientific and Research Council boundaries. ESRC believes that it already provides considerable support to interdisciplinary work. 527 of ESRC's awards current in 2003–4 (representing expenditure of £16 million) involved more than one social science discipline, and 188 awards (with expenditure of £7.2 million in 2003–4) were part of cross-Council initiatives.

The Government agrees that it is important that interdisciplinary applications are appropriately assessed and that this is seen to be done. After the implementation of full economic costing in September 2005, the RCUK Research and Development Group will review the effectiveness of Councils' processes for handling interdisciplinary research proposals, particularly those which straddle Council boundaries. Councils, through the Research and Development Group, will also be sharing information and good practice on training peer reviewers to assess interdisciplinary and risky proposals.

**10. The impact of the move towards full economic costs on grant application success rates needs to be carefully monitored at a cross-Council level. (Paragraph 32)**

The Research Councils are continuing to work towards ensuring the efficient implementation of the new funding system.

It has been agreed at Ministerial level that a small number of measures will be identified to enable the impact of full economic cost (FEC) to be monitored and reported to inform decision making. Research Councils have agreed to collect and report data on a consistent and regular basis in order to redress any concerns that the move to funding of projects on a FEC basis could perturb the current balance of Research Council funding of research in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). In summary this will cover:

- Costs of academic time, included by HEIs under FEC, will be compared with the pre-FEC baseline, at individual Council and RCUK level.

- OST and RCUK are clear that the volume of research supported by the Research Councils in HEIs should neither increase nor decrease as a result of the move to FEC. Councils will monitor the proportion of grant applications which include requests for Research Assistants (RAs), the Full Time Equivalents (FTEs) of academics, RAs, technicians, project students and other staff funded on grants (i.e. five separate counts), and the associated costs, for each Council and collectively as RCUK.
- Councils will monitor the numbers of applications received, and success rates for proposals (by number and by value of grants) will be measured on a quarterly basis (for Councils with no closing dates) or by round (for Councils with closing dates). Success rate data by institution will be published annually from June 2005.

**11. ESRC needs to acknowledge the role that it plays in the increasing concentration of research in a small number of institutions. We recommend that ESRC co-ordinates its activities with the other Research Councils and with HEFCE to ensure the continued funding of excellent social science across a wide range of departments, institutions and regions. (Paragraph 34)**

It is not Government policy explicitly or otherwise to concentrate research funding in large departments. ESRC, along with the other Research Councils, aims to fund the highest quality research wherever it is found. In addition, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) allocates funding on the basis of excellence as the main criterion—and similarly funds excellent research wherever this is found. We recognise that this may mean that the research aspirations of some HEIs cannot be fully supported, but there is no policy of encouraging concentration and we see no evidence that the geographical distribution of Government funding is unhelpfully or harmfully limited. Excellent research is increasingly a global business and as set out in the ‘Science and Innovation Investment Framework 2004–2014’, we attach high priority to maintaining and improving the competitive position of the UK across all major disciplines.

**12. We support ESRC’s decision to use a streamlined peer review process for small grant applications. (Paragraph 37)**

ESRC notes this support.

**13. We note that there are still a number of discrepancies in the peer review processes utilised by the various Research Councils. It is not clear why best practice in peer review should vary significantly between the Research Councils. Moreover, harmonisation of the peer review systems used by the Research Councils should facilitate the evaluation of applications for interdisciplinary research that fall within the remit of more than one Research Council. (Paragraph 39)**

ESRC’s peer review processes are kept under regular review in the light of best practice of other funders. As a part of this, ESRC has actively participated in the development of the cross-Council peer review benchmarking project and is planning for ESRC’s peer review processes to be benchmarked during 2005. ESRC has implemented the recommendations of the Cross-Council Research Forum on the peer review of research proposals at the

interface of the Research Councils and will keep the effectiveness of these proposals under review.

The Research Councils believe that peer review is not a single process, but a set of processes necessary to deal with the different mechanisms for supporting research that is also sensitive to the different needs, beliefs and cultures that exist across the entire academic community. Councils are now moving to a single electronic submission system, and there are opportunities for sharing good practice in the operation of their peer review processes. However, Councils believe that a single peer review process would be inflexible and would not enable the best research to be supported, and that processes should match individual Council's respective missions and the nature of their research communities.

The Councils recognise that there are issues in the support of multidisciplinary/interdisciplinary research. As far as peer review processes are concerned, the Councils do not believe that harmonisation of the process would improve the position. The existence of common forms or common processes is unlikely to alter this as the difficulty is overcoming any inherent conservatism of peer reviewers.

**14. ESRC must continue to work closely with the other Research Councils and the Funding Councils to reduce the deleterious side-effects of the RAE and encourage the RAE subject panels to be open and clear about what they will be measuring and how they intend to do it. (Paragraph 40)**

ESRC will continue its dialogue with the Funding Councils on achieving the optimum conduct of the exercise. RAE 2008 is being set up and managed with close collaboration between the Higher Education funding bodies and the Research Councils. All Research Councils will be sending observers to the meetings of the main panels. These observers will be able to contribute to the discussions to be held by the panels in 2005 on appropriate criteria for assessment. In particular, Research Councils are concerned that interdisciplinary, practice-based and applied research are given due regard in the exercise. A number of the panel and sub-panel members will also be on Research Council committees.

Particular attention is being paid to avoiding possible unintended consequences of the exercise and, in particular, the panels will consult widely on their criteria for assessment before these are published in autumn 2005. ESRC will be responding to this consultation. Recent guidance to the panels (RAE 01/2005—[www.rae.ac.uk/pub/2005/01](http://www.rae.ac.uk/pub/2005/01)) requires them to identify clearly the criteria for excellence that they will apply and the specific evidence, including quantitative data, that they will use to inform their judgements against these criteria.

**15. Longitudinal studies and the collection and maintenance of national datasets are essential to build an evidence base to inform effective policy development. Such work is, however, costly and it is unreasonable to expect ESRC to fund these major activities out of its modest budget. Where a dataset is of particular relevance to a Government Department, the Department should shoulder the majority of the financial burden, whilst taking advantage of ESRC's skills and experience. We recommend that ESRC pursues this issue with the relevant Departments. In addition, given the reliance on these datasets by both Government and the research community, we recommend that**

**future Spending Review allocations ensure that the collection and maintenance of national datasets are fully funded to prevent ESRC having to cut funding for other research activities to preserve these important statistics. (Paragraph 43)**

The Government welcomes the Committee's recognition of the importance of the longitudinal studies and datasets supported by ESRC. The question of co-funding will be raised by ESRC with the relevant Government departments.

When drawing up their Departmental Submission for the Spending Review, departments are currently required to consider their research requirements for evidence-based policy development and service delivery. The Government is currently looking into how to co-ordinate better research and analysis, particularly where the issues are cross-cutting. Issues relating to data sets will be considered as part of this work.

### Cross-Council Collaboration

**16. We are pleased to see that ESRC has been engaged in discussions with the other Research Councils regarding research for international development. (Paragraph 45)**

The Government and ESRC note this recommendation. See also the response to Recommendation 5.

**17. ESRC and the newly-established Arts and Humanities Research Council must clarify their remits in areas of potential overlap and communicate these to their research communities at the earliest possible opportunity. (Paragraph 46)**

Both ESRC and AHRC are committed to work closely to ensure that their respective research communities understand the subject domain and responsibilities of each organisation. AHRB and ESRC already have a joint statement in place of subject coverage which explores the interface between the two. This is currently available on both ESRC and AHRB websites<sup>1</sup>. ESRC and AHRC will of course work together to rectify any lack of clarity for the research community, if this is necessary, including a review of this joint statement on the interfaces between the Arts and Humanities and the Social Sciences. However, neither is currently aware of any major issues regarding this interface/boundary. It will be important that both Councils demonstrate that they are more than content to support high quality work which straddles the boundary between the two Councils.

**18. We welcome the steps taken so far to harmonise the administrative functions of the Research Councils. (Paragraph 47)**

The Government notes the Committee's supportive assessment.

ESRC will continue to work with the other Research Councils, through RCUK, to implement the RCUK administration strategy agreed by Chief Executives in December 2003. The Research Councils are anticipating a range of business benefits to follow from the Research Administration Programme, both internally and to the research organisation

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<sup>1</sup> [www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCContent/aboutesrc/ahrb.asp](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCContent/aboutesrc/ahrb.asp)

[http://www.ahrb.ac.uk/about/subject\\_coverage/joint\\_ahrb\\_esrc\\_statement\\_on\\_subject\\_coverage.asp](http://www.ahrb.ac.uk/about/subject_coverage/joint_ahrb_esrc_statement_on_subject_coverage.asp)

stakeholders. The focus of harmonising administrative functions will continue to be on improving the services that Research Councils provide to the academic community. Research Councils are preparing a plan for making more progress in administrative harmonisation, which will include:

- delivering efficiency gains of £170m by 2007–08 as part of the Research Councils' Gershon efficiency project;
- continuing to implement the research administration project which aims to provide Councils with a common research administration system, enabling electronic processing of grants, fellowships & studentships from submission to completion by 2007–08.

## Support for Researchers

**19. We recommend that ESRC remedies the current lack of support for new researchers by introducing a ring-fenced fund for newly-appointed investigators as soon as possible. We support the suggestion by ESRC that these awards should include training and development tailored to the needs of these researchers. (Paragraph 49)**

ESRC is presently considering, in the context of developing its Delivery Plan 2005–08, a grants scheme specifically for new researchers. This scheme would also support the professional development of new researchers, including project and staff management skills.

**20. We support ESRC's decision to move towards studentships funded for four years but also recommend that ESRC retains sufficient flexibility in the studentships that it offers to meet the diverse needs of both the candidates and higher education institutes in the social science community. (Paragraph 52)**

ESRC acknowledges the need to make its training provision more flexible and is already working towards this. For example, its new 'Postgraduate Training Guidelines' are encouraging Higher Education Institutions to be innovative in the development and delivery of their training programmes.

**21. We agree with ESRC that the allocation of studentships through quotas should assist higher education institutions in forward planning and strategy development. However, it does not follow that the quota system will automatically lead to better quality students being awarded studentships. (Paragraph 53)**

ESRC acknowledges that a quota system will not necessarily lead to the selection of better quality students. However, allowing universities to choose the students which they feel are the best will reduce some of the common criticisms of the competition system.

**22. ESRC must continue to award a significant tranche of studentships through open competition. (Paragraph 57)**

Following further strategic discussion by ESRC's Training and Development Board in December 2004, it has been agreed that ESRC will continue to award a reasonable proportion of studentships through an open competition.

**23. It is important that Research Councils monitor demographic trends amongst their award holders and ensure that the support that they offer is appropriate to their needs. We also recommend that the Research Councils agree on a common approach to data collection on demographics to facilitate comparison of the profiles of their award holders. (Paragraph 60)**

The Research Councils acknowledge the importance of understanding the demographic make-up of their students and each Council currently collects demographic data for its studentship awards. RCUK is now working to actively build consistent monitoring mechanisms across all Councils. The greater, more co-ordinated focus provided by the newly established RCUK unit on Research Careers and Diversity will bring tangible benefits in terms of cross-Council data provision and analysis. This will extend and enhance activities of the RCUK Postgraduate Training Group which include support for transferable skills training agenda, funded following the Roberts Report and led by UKGRAD, which pays particular attention to demographic issues as they affect training delivery. The Group is currently also working with the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) to capture data on Doctoral students' first destinations, and this partnership will vastly improve the ability to identify Research Council-funded students in the population and enable consistent data to be made available, and is in dialogue with the Funding Councils.

There is also a need for all interested parties, including Research Councils, Funding Councils and the universities, to work in partnership to ensure that research capacity across the science base is maintained. This issue is being specifically addressed through the Research Base Funders Forum, who are initially focusing on the short term problems around health of disciplines and are developing of a set of metrics to help DfES, the Funding Councils, OST and Research Councils create and implement evidence based policy on intervention in subjects giving cause for concern.

The Functional Sustainability sub-group of the Funders Forum is working with the Funding Councils to ensure a joint approach both in monitoring the overall system and identifying where action may be needed. Present activities include ESRC working with AHRB and the Funding Councils to provide demographic analysis of academic retirement profiles across the disciplines, with further activities currently being identified. Measures are being considered in strategic context. Suggestions for criteria are national policy drivers requiring particular research expertise; skills issues (particularly shortages); and cultural/quality of life issues.

### Skills Shortages

**24. We are deeply concerned by the skills shortages afflicting, in particular, the quantitative branches of social science. It is hard to see how significant progress towards rectifying these shortages can be made through deployment of ESRC's limited resources. Furthermore, skills shortages in quantitative subjects affect all the Research Councils. If Government is serious about addressing skills shortages in key subjects it needs to find a more effective mechanism to achieve this. We recommend that a cross-Council approach be developed to the reversal of this erosion of the skills base. (Paragraph 66)**

Government is similarly concerned about a national skills shortage, which affects many key areas, including mathematical disciplines, and which underpin not only quantitative branches of social sciences but also many of the natural and physical sciences. We are concerned that there should be an adequate supply of skills across all disciplines, to make Britain one of the most competitive locations in the world for science, research and development. We are fully committed to ensuring that every stage of the education system, from primary schools to universities, can play its part. That is why we have a raft of measures in place, set out in the 'Science and Innovation Investment Framework 2004–2014'.

In addition, Sir Mike Tomlinson has published his final report on 14–19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform. The Report states coherent programmes for 14–16 year olds must include the statutory Key Stage 4 requirements, which include science. It also says we would expect the majority of 14–16 year olds to undertake accredited main learning components in science which meet requirements of the National Curriculum. We will be responding to Mike Tomlinson's report in the form of a White Paper shortly.

In addition to the measures that are already in place, the Government's *Success for All* reform strategy for further education will raise standards of teaching and achievement in colleges, including in social science disciplines; thus increasing the pool of talent on which the higher education sector can draw. In higher education, we recognise the importance of postgraduate research degree programmes in maintaining the skills base. As research funding continues to increase above inflation, institutions should be better able to fund new research staff as existing staff leave. Influencing the supply of such people is complex.

Work on this issue is being taken forward by a number of bodies, including the UK Research Base Funders' Forum. ESRC is committed to working towards the health of all social science disciplines. The Research Councils, Funding Councils and other partners are committed to working together where specific problems may arise.

**25. We recommend the establishment of a national Strategic Capabilities Fund to address skills shortages and ensure national coverage in key subject shortage areas by building local capacity. Measures that could be supported include Research Centres and quotas for studentships in key subject areas or strategic geographical locations. The management of the fund would be co-ordinated by RCUK, but would also require the participation of HEFCE and the Regional Development Agencies. (Paragraph 66)**

Government is not convinced of the need to set up a separate ring-fenced scheme to focus on skills shortages but wishes to enable a flexible response that does not create any additional bureaucracies on HEIs. Different solutions are needed in different cases based on whether action is judged necessary to stimulate demand or to increase supply, and whether the focus is regional or national, on teaching or on research. A central fund would be burdensome; and more likely to attract opportunistic bidding from institutions with a comparatively weak case. Better results can be obtained by Research Councils working bilaterally with HEFCE and with RDAs—as exemplified below.

The 2004 Spending Review provided the DGRC with £35m pa in support of strategic issues which could include health of disciplines issues. The Science Budget allocations, which are

presently being determined, will take account of the health of key disciplines. Details of SR2004 allocations to the Research Councils will be announced shortly.

HEFCE Research Capability Fund supports research in seven emerging subject areas where the research base is currently not as strong as in more established subjects. Departments achieving 3a or 3b ratings in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise are eligible for this funding. The units of assessment supported by the fund are: art and design (UoA 64), communication, cultural and media studies (UoA 65), dance, drama and performing arts (UoA 66), nursing (UoA 10), other studies and professions allied to medicine (UoA 11), social work (UoA 41) and sports-related studies (UoA 69).

In addition to its “capability” fund, HEFCE is working with individual Research Councils on more focussed initiatives to strengthen the research base in sub-disciplines of strategic importance judged to need such support; and is now collaborating with Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) on a Science Innovation Awards scheme covering selected sub-disciplines within their field.

Ensuring national coverage in key subject areas is mainly an issue for the Funding Councils who are represented on the Funders Forum, which has taken a keen interest in this issue. RCUK has worked with the Funding Councils to prepare a report for the Funders Forum which highlights both whole disciplines and sub-disciplines in urgent need of investment if a strong research base is to be ensured. Both the Funding Councils and the Research Councils wish to take forward this agenda jointly.

**26. We are pleased that ESRC has undertaken to conduct international reviews of subject areas, as pioneered by EPSRC. ESRC should make a firm commitment to do this in its next Operating Plan. (Paragraph 67)**

ESRC is committed to carrying out the first international review in 2005.

### Knowledge Transfer and User Engagement

**27. We applaud ESRC’s efforts to improve the communication and dissemination of its research and encourage it to continue, in particular, to provide opportunities for award holders to enhance their skills in this area. ESRC’s work in this area serves as a model of good practice for other Research Councils. (Paragraph 70)**

The Government notes this assessment and will encourage ESRC to continue to do this. ESRC intends to expand its work on improving communication and dissemination of its research.

The Government fully supports ESRC’s intention to expand its current training provision for the researchers it supports on public engagement and knowledge transfer activities.

**28. ESRC has taken laudable steps to improve the quality of its science and society activities but it needs to ensure that it evaluates rigorously the effectiveness of these activities. (Paragraph 71)**

The Government and ESRC agree with this recommendation.

**29. We are pleased that ESRC guarantees that negative results arising from research that it funds are made freely available within a reasonable period after the project has been completed. (Paragraph 72)**

The ESRC is developing an online information centre, ESRC Society Today, which will help to disseminate further all research outcomes to a broad audience, and which will include all end of award reports on completed projects as well as any materials voluntarily submitted by award holders. ESRC exercise no control over academic publications resulting from ESRC funded work.

**30. ESRC-funded researchers have done some valuable work with industry. We support these efforts and hope that industry will continue to engage with UK social scientists. We trust that ESRC is taking steps to rectify its lack of data collection on its interaction with industry. (Paragraph 73)**

ESRC recognises the scope for improvement in its data collection in this area, such as the aggregation of data held at the level of individual programmes and centres, and will be addressing this.

## Conclusion

The Government welcomes the Committee's report and notes that ESRC is already working to consider and address many of the recommendations. The areas of science which ESRC supports, and on which it works with RCUK and partners to deliver, are of increasing importance and relevance. The Government supports the recommendations which will build a "critical mass" of social researchers which can support the development of policies which impact on society and the economy

*February 2005*

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