THE RESPONSE OF THE BRITISH SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION (BSA) AND THE COUNCIL OF HEADS AND PROFESSORS OF SOCIOLOGY (HaPS) TO THE ESRC ADVANCED TRAINING NETWORK CONSULTATION

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What gaps do you think there are within the network and how could those gaps be addressed?

Because of the uneven population of courses by DTCs, it is not clear whether any gaps arise because a course hasn't been offered, or because it hasn't been developed. It seems clear that there are wide disparities in the extent to which DTCs are offering courses and whether they are truly advanced courses and not likely to be offered elsewhere. The duplication of courses is positive from the point of view of access, but there is a difficulty in seeing the wood for the trees.

Regional organisation of courses would be helpful.

There seem to be clear gaps in methods associated with comparative research, whether cross-national or cross cultural and specific methods like multi-sited ethnography, critical and comparative case studies, QCA and other non-variable based methodologies.

There also seems to be a gap in the provision of advanced subject-specific courses in those core subjects, such as sociology, politics, etc, that have previously been associated with 'generic research methods' (in contrast to economics and psychology, say). Paradoxically, there are many courses in generic methods that have been developed in specific interdisciplinary contexts that seem to be about professional 'closure' rather than expanding research methods engagement and where the advanced level of the course is not clear (eg education, business studies).

Are there significant emerging capacity issues that you are aware of in a discipline/ method and how could those capacity issues be addressed?

One issue arises from the very creation of DTCs and the absence of a clear statement of the distinction between core and advanced training that could be used by non-DTCs in order to provide local training that would provide access to DTC/NCRM training. It is no longer clear even within DTCs that students are expected to reach a threshold level prior to accessing courses designated as advanced, or when that threshold is provided (eg in year one of 1+3). In consequence, there is a risk, even within DTCs, that general training has fallen below that of the previous 1+3 system, even where there is provision of multiple courses. For example, it is no longer evident that there is a general expectation that all PhD students in a subject area within an ESRC-recognised DTC will be undertaking appropriate research methods training in year one of their doctorates as was previously required and less that all students are encouraged to access advanced training offered through NCRM.

What are the most significant barriers to access for students wanting to attend advanced training courses?

One potential obstacle is the problem of the extent to which threshold courses continue to be offered at institutions outside a DTC – the consequence of the decision not to recognise DTUs may have had an impact on provision that would enable access to advanced-level courses.

One of the difficulties for students – especially those outside a DTC - is navigating the network and identifying the opportunities that exist elsewhere. The typology of research methods is very useful, but doesn't seem to have been applied very efficiently to the listing of courses. For example, searching under 'epistemology' and 'case studies' seems to show a lot of courses that are not appropriately categorised. In the case of the first category, it is not clear that anything listed is truly 'advanced' rather than threshold (ie covers ground that would be covered in any set of core courses within a DTC and outside).

Another confusion seems to have arisen from some DTCs offering many courses and others offering a few. For example, see the contrast between Cambridge and Oxford. The first has offered too many for it to be easy to identify just how advanced they are, the latter has offered too few indicating less than willing participation in opening up courses. There is also considerable overlap in some of the courses and it is difficult to identify which might be the most appropriate.

A useful architecture would include regional as well as category classifications and to have a separate classification of courses which are so specialised that they are likely only to be provided in one centre and those that are specialised, but ought to be provided in at least one centre in a region.

A number of colleagues have spoken of the cost of the provisions as a major disincentive to participation. This is particularly so in the absence of a clear regional distribution of courses where accommodation and travel costs, as well as registration costs add to the extent. It is also evident that there isn't a clear understanding hat some bursaries are available for students outside DTCs to enable them to participate.

Finally, colleagues in Northern Ireland – who previously had access to the equivalent of DTU recognition and access to CASE awards – are concerned that there is now no system of recognised provision within Northern Ireland.

What are the most appropriate mechanisms to improve access to this network of advanced training?

Better distribution of courses regionally, to reduce travel and accommodation costs; provision on a workshop basis supported by prior activities undertaken through VLE (latter would also encourage engagement and could act as a registration device).

How could virtual learning environments/ online courses be better utilised across the network to help open up access to more PGRs?

We believe that VLE is very helpful in preparatory work and in provision of 'refresher' materials, but that face-to-face workshops are the best means of delivering research training and access is better addressed through ensuring good regional distribution of provision and wider understanding of what is available.

Are there any other comments or observations you would like to make about the current content and operation of the advanced training network?

We believe that one of the problems is a failure to communicate what is available and to do so within a clear understanding of the typology of research methods developed to facilitate communication. We think professional associations could help by developing subject-specific information on courses and by promoting research training activities, including workshops at a pre-conference day around their annual conferences. This would facilitate the integration of training with wider career, intellectual and professional development of postgraduate researchers and help to make the programme of advanced training more widely known and available to postgraduate students outside existing DTCs.