



Joint response from British Sociological Association and the UK Council of Heads and Professors of Sociology (HaPS)

July 2017

1. The general state of sociology in the Universities in your country- is it healthy or under threat. Are student numbers going up or down etc.? Are Departments being closed to new ones set up? Are new appointments being made?

As a discipline Sociology has been widely taught in British universities since the 1960s and 1970s. This was the period of the general expansion of the university system and a number of the leading Departments of Sociology were created in this period. The high point of expansion of the discipline can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s, although it has continued to expand and grow in the period since. This expansion has been reflected in the work of the British Sociological Association, which holds an annual conference that has grown in recent years, as well as hosting a number of more specialised conferences in sub-fields of sociology and a growing number of study groups that reflect research and teaching interests in sub-fields of sociology. It can be argued that as compared to some social science disciplines, such as Economics and Politics and International Studies, Sociology is under more pressure in terms of levels of recruitment to core Undergraduate and Masters programmes. But there is also evidence that the discipline remains at the forefront of key areas of research in the current period, is able to attract excellent quality staff, and has a key role in doctoral training programmes in the social sciences.

At the Undergraduate level the discipline is taught in a wide range of both established and new universities, even ones that have no Department of Sociology as such. It is an established part of the undergraduate curriculum in a wide range of universities, ranging from the research-intensive Russell Group to new universities with a teaching focus. Aside from single honours Sociology programmes it is often taught jointly with other Social Science and Humanities subjects, including Politics and International Studies, Law, History, Philosophy and Media and Cultural Studies.

The teaching of sociology is also strong in the form of MA programmes, which in the British context take the form of one year taught courses. Taught postgraduate programmes focus on both generic Sociology and Methods courses, as well as more specialised sub-fields that reflect demand for postgraduate study in more specialised areas.

There are a number of large doctoral programmes in Sociology, particularly within the Russell Group and in the larger Departments of Sociology. The discipline is closely involved in the new Doctoral Training Partnerships that were funded by the Economic and Social Research Council from 2016 onwards.

Over the past decade there has been pressure in terms of recruitment to undergraduate programmes and to MA programmes. There is evidence that the tide is turning somewhat and Sociology features among the top 10 subjects in the latest UCAS statistics of applications to universities. In the latest UCAS statistics Sociology is behind only Economics, Politics and Human and Social Geography among the Social Sciences. There is also evidence of increased number of students taking Sociology as a subject at A-Level. The A-Level Sociology curriculum has been revised and updated from 2015 and this will hopefully lead to an expansion in the number of A-Level students choosing the discipline though there are different views about this.

2. Do you have a research assessment process in place and if so what form does it take: National, institutional; how often; what is submitted etc.?

As a discipline Sociology has been part of a national research assessment exercise since the 1990s. In 1992, 1996, 2001 and 2008 Sociology departments were assessed as part of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). This took the form of an assessment of the research outputs of each Department as well as an assessment of the research environment for sociology. A dedicated panel was appointed in each case by the Higher Education Funding Council and all universities were given the opportunity to submit units of assessment to be reviewed by these panels.

In 2014 Sociology Departments were assessed as part of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which replace the RAE. A Sub-Panel for Sociology was set up under Main Panel C of the REF, which oversaw the assessment of all Social Science disciplines. In addition to assessing research outputs and research environment the REF Sub-Panels were asked to assess the Impact of their disciplines on the wider society, in terms of policy, social and cultural values and related issues.

The next REF is due to take place in 2021. It looks likely that a Sociology Sub-Panel will be appointed to look at the discipline again. The processes to be adopted in 2021 will be announced later in 2017, although it is likely they will be based on the approach taken by REF 2014.

3. How successful is sociology in any assessment exercise?

The discipline has been relatively successful in gaining access to the funding that is made available to Departments once the RAE and REF rankings are announced. Although there have been some significant changes in the rankings of Departments from 1992 to 2014 a number of the established departments have benefitted from the funding streams that the RAE/REF has created over that period.

One of the key concerns within the discipline has been the decline in the number of units of assessment submitted under Sociology, particularly relative to the growth of submissions to the Social Policy and Social Work Panel. In 2001 there were 48 submissions to the Sociology RAE. This reduced to 39 for the 2008 RAE, and by REF 2014 there was a further reduction to 29. A key challenge for the discipline will be to reverse this decline and increase the number of Departments/Units of Assessment that choose to submit to the Sociology Sub-Panel.

4. Are there journal rankings for sociology?

As a discipline Sociology in Britain does not have an agreed list of journal rankings. There are a number of General Sociology journals that have developed and have an international profile. The British Sociological Association has four journals under its auspices: *Sociology*, *Work, Employment and Society*, *Cultural Sociology* and *Sociological Research Online*. In addition, there are a number of journals that have developed around sub-fields in areas such as health, gender, race and ethnicity, social research methods, media and society, cultural sociology.

A number of the key British based general sociology journals are highly ranked in the JCI Journal Citation Reports. These include:

- *Sociology*
- *British Journal of Sociology*
- *Sociological Review*

Although both established and early career sociologists are aware of the Impact Factors of these and other journals, there has also been a reluctance to accept the idea of an agreed list of Sociology journals along the lines of disciplines such as Economics and Business and Management Studies. In the Research Excellence Framework, the Sociology Sub-Panel makes no use of Impact Factor rankings in providing assessments of journal articles that are submitted.

5. What are the percentage success rates for funding research in Sociology from National and EU sources

As a discipline Sociology has been involved in applications for research funding from research councils, government departments, EU funding and most recently the European Research Council. A key source of funding for researchers in Sociology is represented by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Sociologists have been relatively successful in attracting funding from the ESRC, even though the success rates across all disciplines have been under pressure in the past two decades. According to the figures published by the ESRC for the three-year period from 2014-15 to 2016-17 31% of Sociology applications were successful; this amounted to a total of £66 millions of funding over this period. This success rate compares well with the other disciplines that are funded by the ESRC.

6. What are the possibilities for job security and/or promotion for researchers in sociology?

At the present time the picture in terms of job security seems somewhat mixed. There are examples of Departments growing and expanding and creating opportunities both for early career researchers as well as senior researchers. In some cases, this has been linked to the growth of joint programmes in Sociology and Criminology that have attracted a growing number of students at the undergraduate level. In other cases, there is evidence of an expansion of Sociology teaching at undergraduate level within a broader institutional environment. There are staff appointed in some cases on temporary teaching-only contracts, though in many cases these appointments seem to be linked to providing teaching cover for staff on research leave funded by external research grants or sabbatical.

An important challenge in the coming decade will be how the growing number of PhD students coming out of the discipline will fare in terms of getting permanent positions in either Departments of Sociology or broader Social Science groupings. There are a growing number of early career researchers in Sociology that will be looking for positions in either Departments of Sociology or wider Social Science groupings in the coming period and the discipline faces a challenge in terms of providing opportunities for them.

7. Any other information which you would like to share about the support/lack of support for research in sociology

The coming period is likely to pose some new issues in terms of support for research in British Sociology. Perhaps the biggest of these challenges relates to the potential impact of Brexit on sources of research funding that have been beneficial to a number of departments over the past few decades. The European Research Council has been an important source for the funding of larger projects in recent years and the loss of this support is likely to impact on the discipline.

In addition to the challenges linked to Brexit it is likely that as a discipline we shall face increased competition for funding from the Economic and Social Research Council and other funders of social science research. The ESRC is currently in the process of being reorganised and this has led to a period of uncertainty in any case, and the loss of European sources of funding will in all likelihood add to these pressures.