

Item 1
ESRC 2026-01
07.05.26

Author: Sophie Kirby

First presentation of this paper

No conflicts of interest have been identified

ESRC Council Meeting Minutes 07.05.26

Members: *Todd Landman (Senior Independent Member - SIM), Anita Charlesworth, David Halpern, Cecilia Wong, Becky Francis, Kelly Beaver, Alex Edmans, Alex Freeman, Christina Boswell, Laura Gilbert, Catherine Hutchinson*

ESRC Directors: *Stian Westlake (SW), Alison Park (AP), Claire Graves (CG), Jen Gold (JG)*

Attendees: *Peter Ethelston, Caitlin Tickell, Gill Attrill (for item 6), Anne-Marie Canning (for item 6), Lucy Thorne (for item 7), Tracy Davies (for item 7)*

Apologies: *Andrew Dilnot*

Secretariat: *Sophie Kirby*

Agenda Item #1-4: Chair's Welcome & Council Business

Todd welcomed the group to the 34th meeting of Council and invited the Council members to introduce themselves.

- The SIM welcomed the group and thanked new council members for their attendance, inviting Christina Boswell, Alex Freeman, Alex Edmans, Laura Gilbert, and Kelly Beaver to introduce themselves. The SIM also thanked Alison Park for her incredible service to ESRC and to Council. It was mentioned that Andrew Dilnot sends his apologies for this meeting.
- The SIM explained changes to the management of the Conflicts of Interest Process.
- The minutes from February's meeting were marked as approved and signed off. One amendment was mentioned within the education comments. All actions were acknowledged as closed and the forward schedule was presented.
 - A suggestion of looking at the peer review process was noted for a future meeting (including changes to the process) informed by Metascience insights.
 - It was noted that an additional item looking into the future of funding and the breakdown of spending across UKRI could be helpful.

Agenda Item #5: Executive Chair's Business

SW presented the Executive Chair's Report

- SW presented his Executive Chair's report, noting that UKRI is in a new spending review period. The work ongoing with the Applicant-Led Mode refresh (React and Connect Pilots, Bucket 2 Industrial Strategy programme & R&D MAP progress, the Decision Maker Panel recommission, and the targeted IRO competition were all mentioned.

- SW's perspectives on medium-and long-term risks were shared with Council. SW discussed the shift he desired to see from ESRC seeing itself primarily as funder, whose performance should be judged simply in terms of efficiency and fairness, to an organisation responsible for making research investments, and therefore accountable not just for running sound processes, but for the outcomes of those processes.
- Members requested further sight of recently funded grants and a breakdown of ESRC's portfolio, to ensure sight of and understanding of large funding decisions. SW agreed that this item would come to July Council.
 - The importance of classifying and analysing ESRC's portfolio was stressed, and the current development of a 'UKRI pipeline' of upcoming research opportunities was discussed.
 - Members queried whether it would be possible to share the breakdown of the portfolio in the interests of transparency, to crowd-source the missing areas of research, ensure that the right things are being researched, and that gaps are identified and addressed. This information is already publicly available through Gateway to Research but is not presented in a format that makes the structure of the portfolio as a whole obvious.
 - It was commented that the timing of publishing of research portfolio information requires careful consideration.
 - Understanding ESRC's portfolio was pointed out as crucial, and that METIUS and Metascience work are integral to this.
 - Members discussed the importance of investment management and follow-up (ensuring outcomes, benefit realisation) for ESRC funded grants, noting that this could be a future meeting agenda item.
 - The importance of understanding the broader economic framing or social question which leads to the development of a funded project.
- Members were keen to have clearer information on the role of Council in respect of key decisions. A specific request was made to ensure Council was informed of new Council member appointments ahead of time. Information about the process for the appointment of the new SIM (for after November) was also requested. At the same time, members discussed that Council should not seek to take over or delay decisions that are rightly the remit of the Executive.
- The importance of Council members working more closely with UKRI and the wider ecosystem on was noted.
- Members noted the importance of ensuring awareness of ESRC funding as government money given to ESRC in order to improve and advance the country.
 - Members caveated this however with the note of ever-changing and emerging priorities in a changing landscape.
- Members discussed the possibilities of different stages at which Council members could be involved in grant management and portfolio analysis (including the option of building in 'stages' in the pipeline where members could be engaged).
 - Clearer accounts of what is occurring within funded projects were requested, and a suggestion of staged funding to ensure ability to intervene easily was discussed.
- The functioning of peer and panel review of projects was recognised as being crucial to ESRC's effectiveness, and it was agreed that a discussion on this would be held at the next Council meeting (including a walk-through of how peer and panel review processes currently work).
 - It was noted that Council members have an open invite to attend panel meetings and are welcome to attend.

- Council members mentioned the importance of framing external speakers and guest appearances within Council meetings and noted the need for both the impact and outcomes of research being prioritised within ESRC's ongoing and continuous portfolio analysis work.

Agenda Item #6: State of the Nation

Stian Westlake presented ESRC's annual portfolio of key facts and figures, the 'State of the Nation'

- SW presented the 'State of the Nation' report of ESRC's key facts and figures.
 - The breakdown of funding was with council members, including funding headroom. It was noted that the portfolio overview will be shared with members as soon as possible.
- Council members made comments regarding the importance of ensuring that ESRC data investments are considering the high likelihood of cyber-attacks and have robust plans in place.
- The upcoming recommissioning of the Impact Acceleration Accounts (IAAs) was noted, and an evaluation of IAAs that was conducted several years ago was offered to be shared with members if of interest.
 - The importance of ensuring collaboration is incentivised in this area was recognised.
 - ESRC will ensure to engage interested council members during the recommissioning of the IAAs, especially colleagues with investment or expertise in this area.
- Council members requested information regarding the ESRC-funded centres which currently fall into 'transition' funding, and a discussion ensued around the importance of financial sustainability.
 - Council members noted the importance of understanding which ESRC-funded centres are relevant into Industrial Strategy and Wider Priorities areas, noting it was crucial that ESRC assisted in making connections and increasing visibility.
 - Council members asked that they are kept informed of centres as they are funded

Agenda Item #7: Info Item: R&D Missions Accelerator Programme (MAP) Deep Dive – Safer Streets and Opportunities Missions

Gill and Anne-Marie presented an information item on two of R&D MAP's Challenges, Safer Streets and Opportunities

- SW introduced the wider R&D MAP programme and the Challenge Directors. Anne-Marie shared information on the one-pager provided by the Opportunities mission, and Gill shared information on Safer Streets.
- Council members thanked the presenters, noting their enthusiasm and qualification as Directors and heads of these areas.
- The Council CSA noted the importance of the inclusion of 'economic abuse' within the safer streets mission and offered to continue to integrate government with both missions, especially regarding the NEET (not in education, employment, or training) focuses within Opportunities.
- Council members noted interest in continuing advocacy, especially for the SEN (special education needs) work within Opportunities.
- The importance of furthering the evidence base for both missions was stressed, and a question was raised regarding the overall response of the social science ecosystem. It was noted that the programme is still in early days, but the initial response has been very promising.
- It was noted that certain funding mechanisms often complicate the ability of teams to respond to need, urgency, and enthusiasm.
- The importance of interconnectivity with different What Works Centres and other ESRC funded centres was noted, and a question regarding ensuring agility to react to changing signals was raised.

- Linking to other discussions, it was noted that ESRC-funded policy fellows are working in What Works Centres and that R&DMAP leads are continuously ensuring that the work is aligned with government departments.
- It was also noted that there will be a hire made to conduct a review of the different landscapes that the missions operate within.
- Leveraging and co-funding were noted as important ways for the missions to maintain agility and respond to changing signals, as well as reviews and break clauses. The importance of mobilising philanthropic investment was stressed.
- The challenges of evaluation were noted in response to a query about defining successes later down the line.

Agenda Item #8: Maximising the Strategic Value of ESRC's Investment in Social Science Research Talent *Alison Park and Lucy Thorne introduced an item focused on talent investment within ESRC*

- AP and Lucy Thorne introduced the item focused on doctoral training, noting previous reviews of talent funding and current synthesis across the UKRI talent portfolio more broadly.
 - Context was provided for new council members particularly on the definition and focus of Doctoral Landscape Awards and Doctoral Focal awards, noting that the next funding opportunity for doctoral landscape awards will be advertised in 2027, to start recruiting cohorts of students from October 2029 onwards.
- A key theme throughout the discussion was the quantum of PhD opportunities that ESRC should support as part of its Talent commitments and whether the balance between PhD funding and funding aimed at later research career stages was optimum. Council noted the highly competitive nature of ESRC's current PhD opportunities. Members noted challenges facing the research and innovation sector over the next decade. The importance of doctoral training that benefits non-academic careers was a strong theme.
 - Provocation raised: Is ESRC's pipeline built to allow for PhDs who want to go into non-academic roles following their PhD? It was noted that this key question was a major feature in the Review of the Social Science PhD (which shaped the current Doctoral Training Partnership) and would continue to be a key theme of the team's work in developing the next funding opportunity.
 - Council members were keen to explore the overall ambition of ESRC's investment in doctoral training and what it sets out to achieve. The team noted varied functions and subsequent shaping of PhDs across different councils in terms of their desired 'end goals'.
 - Council discussed whether PhDs are being funded in the areas where social science and the research and innovation sector more broadly have gaps or needs. There was appetite for being more directive in these instances.
- The team was advised of the need to equip social scientists undertaking PhDs with transferrable skills and literacy across different areas, sectors, and disciplines. Relevance of social science to the Industrial Strategy and Wider Government Priorities areas was noted.
- The following models were discussed as providing useful insights:
 - Cohort or lab approaches were suggested as especially relevant to building teams skills and capability. Lab models were seen as particularly relevant to interdisciplinary collaboration.
 - Students working within larger projects to achieve their PhD were suggested as potential additional approaches.
 - There was an interest in PhD partnerships with government, industry or the third sector. Council members mentioned positive past experience with CASE studentships. Council noted these

partnerships could help ensure accessibility of the right kind of data for enriching and powerful projects relevant in the landscape, noting data access impediments.

- Throughout it was noted that PhDs should be open to 'non-traditional' pathways, for example, those returning to academia from other sectors.
- Developments within the Pardee RAND Graduate School were noted as worth exploring.
- The importance of ESRC being able to understand and assess the successes and future career paths of its PhD students is vital if we are to fully synthesise and understand outcomes. This is an area of known weakness, with cross-UKRI activity taking place to address it. Relevance to Metascience and ESRC's Strategic Awareness Function (or Research and Innovation Analytics Function) was also noted.
 - A provocation surrounding the optimum duration of a PhD was raised, particularly in the fast-paced world of data and with the continued evolution of artificial intelligence. This discussion extended to consider the skills needed in the current environment which could be gained and strengthened throughout a PhD. In this context, Council members noted the socio-economic barriers which exist when it comes to the financial and time commitments which a PhD requires.

Agenda Item #9: AOB

The SIM opened for any other business from Council members

- There was no AOB to share.
- The SIM and SW thanked colleagues for all of their hard work in organising the event, noting the success and richness of the previous workshop day and the meeting today.

Papers for Discussion by Exception:

- Draft July Council Agenda

Actions to Note:

1	ESRC will ensure to engage interested council members during the recommissioning of the IAAs, especially colleagues with investment or expertise in this area.	SW and Executive Board
2	Council members asked that they are kept informed of centres as they are funded.	SW and Executive Board
3	ESRC will in future present more detailed information to Council on the portfolio of funded projects, including a complete listing of projects, categorised into appropriate thematic areas, and information on the outcomes and performance of investments (particularly larger ones)	SW and Executive Board
4		
5		

Future Agenda Items Raised:

1	A suggestion of looking at the peer review process was noted for a future meeting (including changes to the process) informed by Metascience insights.	Forward Look
2	A regular item would be scheduled (either as part of the EC's report or separately) on Social Science investments and involvement within UKRI priority programmes in Bucket 2	Forward Look



3	Stian will bring an item on a ESRC Portfolio Review to July Council	July Council
4	Members discussed the importance of investment management and follow-up (ensuring outcomes, benefit realisation) for ESRC funded grants, noting that this could be a future meeting agenda item.	Forward Look
5	Peer Review College and Processes	July Council
6		