

ESRC Research Institutes

Scope

This document covers the following areas relating to ESRC research institutes:

- Definition, vision and key features
- Eligibility
- Review Process
- Assessment criteria

Research institute status

Research institute status will be awarded to ESRC research centres that have demonstrated their long term strategic value to the council and to the broader social science research landscape. A centre with such status will receive long term ESRC funding subject to a five year review process. The budget for a centre with research institute status will be in line with standard ESRC centre funding thresholds (currently between £2 and £10 million over a five year period). It is anticipated that there will be a very small number of centres with institute status.

The vision for institutes

Institutes are viewed as global centres of excellence, who play a critical strategic role in the development of the national and international social science research landscape. They are expected to produce research outputs of international quality and generate impact that extends beyond the academic community. In so doing, institutes are expected to provide broad leadership within the social sciences, through the development and dissemination of new research ideas, and strengthen the research base through capacity building both within and beyond the UK.

Centres eligible to apply for institute status will have clearly demonstrated their strategic value through persistent success in ESRC Centres Competitions and funding from the ESRC over a long period.

Long term funding for a select number of strategically important institutes is intended to empower them to pursue long-term, complex research challenges and also more innovative/risky approaches with a higher level of flexibility and financial security. As enduring and well-resourced features on the social science landscape, they will also be capable of responding promptly in cases of national need.

Institutes are expected to demonstrate:

- long term strategic value to the ESRC, and through their work to the social science landscape more generally
- a tightly woven critical mass of highly regarded principal and co-investigators
- a well-developed long term research agenda focused on complex, deep seated enduring research challenges
- high impact research outputs of international standard
- high impact non-academic outputs that inform policy and practice
- leadership in capacity building across the social science research base in the UK and beyond
- broader leadership of the sector through their prominent role in national and international learned societies and other academic networks
- a significant fit to the long term research strategy of their host research organisation
- a significant financial commitment from their host research organisation and/or a strong strategic plan to leverage funding

The funding of centres with institute status

Institutes will be funded through a rolling five year award process at a level consistent with standard ESRC research centre funding thresholds (currently between £2-10 million over a five year period). Renewal of funding will be subject to a five year review process, when the institute will be expected to report on progress of its existing research programme and outline its proposed research programme for the next five years. This will be accompanied by a proposed new budget. The review will take place early in the fourth year of any five year award cycle.

The ESRC reserves the right to hold a 'special review' outside of the normal review cycle if that is deemed necessary. The possible causes for a special review include the under-performance of the institute against its agreed objectives or a significant change in leadership – particularly the directorship – of the institute.

Commitment from research organisation

Given the ESRC's decision to offer sustained support to a select number of centres through Institute status, there is an expectation that the host research organisation will similarly make a significant strategic long term financial commitment. The ESRC will need to be convinced that any centre with institute status is fully embedded within the host research organisation and is demonstrably an integral part of the RO's research strategy. Any centres not based in independent research organisations not in receipt of QR funding are expected to demonstrate how they have a long term sustainable business model that will support the centre into the future.

The governance of ESRC centres with institute status

An Institute will be expected to have high level advisory board made up of a mix of senior academics, policymakers and other business and third sector practitioners. They will also be expected to have a close strategic relationship with the ESRC, meeting regularly with senior staff and ESRC investment managers. The ESRC will also wish to meet periodically with

senior representatives from the host research organisation to discuss the strategic direction and continued funding of the Institute.

Eligibility to apply for ESRC institute status

To be eligible for research institute status an existing centre will need to have been successful in a minimum of three ESRC research Centre Competitions. Centre funding secured through non-competitive means will not 'count' towards cumulative eligibility. Non-competitive means of securing centre funding that would *not* count include:

- a mid-term review renewal
- centre transition funding
- an invitation only application process

Success in three centre competitions need not be consecutive but it is expected that it will have led to continuous ESRC funding and a coherent long term research programme, which will have evolved over time. Continuous funding and a coherent, enduring research programme will be a necessary conditions of institute status, demonstrating the centre's long term relationship and strategic value to the ESRC.

Any significant break in ESRC funding would mean that a centre would become ineligible until in receipt of ESRC funding again, at which point the 'count' would start from zero. Equally a very significant change in purpose and work programme of a centre even with continuous funding (ie effectively a new centre) will restart the 'count' towards cumulative eligibility for Institute status.

Any other major ESRC funding (eg large grant) gained through open competitions will provide evidence of continuous funding but will not 'count' towards the requirement of success in three open Centres Competitions in building cumulative eligibility.

Review process

A research centre that has successfully secured funding through at least three research Centres Competitions, whilst eligible to apply, will *not* automatically be conferred with ESRC institute status. There is review process, which will include:

- an application from the centre director
- an analysis of Researchfish data and summaries
- an independent review of the scientific quality and non-academic impact of the centre
- an office report on the performance of the centre
- an interview with a sub panel of ESRC Council members and the ESRC Director of Research

Assessment criteria

In assessing the eligibility for research institute status the following criteria will be used:

- **Adding strategic value**
A research institute must clearly add value to the portfolio of research investments supported by the ESRC in terms of overall coverage and balance of investments. It must demonstrate its strong strategic fit with ESRC's mission and priorities over its lifetime. It must also demonstrate its strategic importance to the broader national and international social science research landscape.
- **Research excellence and impact**
The research institute will demonstrate a sustained track record of research excellence and scholarly and non-academic impact. It will need to offer a convincing rationale for further investment, including why a break in funding would be inefficient and expensive.
- **Broader leadership and impact across the social science research base**
The research institute will need to evidence how it has provided broader leadership across the social science research base. This will need to include its leadership or prominent role in learned societies and other national and international academic networks and how, through capacity building, it has helped to strengthen the research base both within and beyond the UK.
- **Institutional commitment**
The research institute will need to demonstrate how it is embedded within its host research organisation and is an integral part of that RO's long term research strategy. The expectation is that ESRC's long term investment through institute status, will be matched by a significant strategic commitment from the RO.

An ESRC centre that is hosted by an independent RO may apply for institute status. The expectation is that the centre will be able to clearly demonstrate how it intends to generate income from other funding sources to ensure its long term sustainability.

Exit / sun-setting

If circumstances are such that the ESRC wishes to withdraw institute status following a five-year or special review then there would be an orderly wind down of funding. Centres will be offered the opportunity to apply for Transition funding under the standard process.