



**ESRC Consultation: Research Leadership in the
Social Sciences**

**Response from the Chartered Association of
Business Schools**

16 August 2019

The original consultation documents are available at:

<https://esrc.ukri.org/files/research/fit-for-the-future-research-leadership-in-the-social-sciences/>

The Chartered Association of Business Schools is pleased to submit a response to the Flinders Review *Fit for the Future: Research Leadership in the Social Sciences*. Many of our member business schools have a strong focus on producing high quality research and are keenly interested in approaches to enhancing their research capability at all levels. They therefore welcome the opportunity to engage with the ESRC on these important issues.

1. Do the challenges presented above around researcher and leadership development fit with your understanding or not? If not please explain why.

There is general recognition of the challenges as presented, although it could be argued that the position is even more challenging given the current focus of research funding towards large, collaborative projects related to the Industrial Strategy. There are likely a cadre of senior research leaders with useful insights, but not all have experience in working across disciplines, which is clearly becoming more important.

The further issue is the lack of reward and recognition at institution level for those engaged in research leadership. Current provision is probably most supportive for junior faculty, with the most obvious gaps at the mid and senior levels. This is especially acute when faculty progress from probation and where they are unsupported yet must compete against more experienced colleagues. Apart from help in preparing for grant applications there is no support once big projects have been won.

a. Is there further evidence that should be considered?

The report is comprehensive and is very useful in and of itself. However, it could be useful to look at the 2009 [review of energy research](#) as an example of a similar review. It is important to include gender and minority category analysis and perspective. For example, it would be useful to reflect on the figures on the gender differences in terms of current research leadership roles: proportion of men versus women, as well as similar figures on minority categories as Primary Investigators and Co-Investigators on ESRC (and other) large grants. Is there evidence that women and other minority groups are under-represented? If so, what are the specific challenges they face and how can these be addressed?

b. Are there alternative interpretations in need of review?

More could be said of the particular challenges of providing leadership in a multi-disciplinary context. This is discussed, but part of the problem is the 'end of pipe' role that other disciplines assign to social science. There is a sense that the science and engineering fields now recognise the importance of involving social scientists in big, problem-oriented projects, but they are not sure how they should be integrated and what role they should play.

In terms of the review process, **ESRC is likely to receive better applications if impact is judged at the GAP stage, not at the initial stage.** Researchers have to burn up personal capital in obtaining letters, support etc, for bids that on average have a 13-17% chance of success. It would be much better if individuals completed the application, which would then go to peer review, and if the application gets a score high enough to go to GAP then applicants would be invited to submit impact evidence. Under this approach applicants could inform impact partners that they have been shortlisted for a grant rather than having to explain to important partners that the application had been unsuccessful. It would also be much more efficient in terms of time expended.

Further, when bids are rejected Research Councils need to communicate reasons for the rejection in a non-academic way, so that those who have supported the bid can understand the reasons. This is not restricted to the ESRC and is an issue which cuts across all research councils.

The consultation document implicitly assumes that the social sciences need to move towards 'large, complex 'team science' projects' – this is what is creating the research leadership challenge. There are some issues raised by this:

- As well as highlighting issues around research leadership, this shift also raises more profound and existential questions around the nature of the social sciences and the knowledge they produce. For example, the large interdisciplinary, multi-sectoral, challenge-led projects tend to be more applied – much of social science research retains a key concern with theoretical innovation. Is this a factor impacting on the uptake of 'team science' and, if so, how can it be addressed?
- 'Team science' entails divisions of academic labour with senior members involved in research management and junior members doing much of the actual research. This model is more common, and seemingly more widely accepted, in the sciences than the social sciences. This may account for the slow uptake of 'team science' among social scientists. European Research Council, Leverhulme and other senior fellowship schemes are more focused around the individual scholar, but this also requires research leadership development of a different kind. This support and training would also be useful to senior academics.
- Team dynamics are a further issue to consider: the literature on team and collaborative research raises concerns over exploitative practices towards junior team members, and gender differences between senior (mostly men on permanent contracts) and junior (mostly women on short term contracts) members. These issues may be impacting uptake of 'team science' in the social sciences and would usefully be addressed in research leadership training and development.

2. Would the creation of a national framework for researcher and leadership development be useful or not?

A national framework is widely thought to be a good idea. It should include diversity concerns and should not just reflect a 'team science' approach. There should also be a CPD requirement built in to maintain currency of skills and competencies acquired by individuals. Crucial will be the part played by universities so that researchers are acknowledged, rewarded and promoted on other grounds and not just based on how much grant funding is secured.

a. Are there alternative solutions you would favour over this suggested approach?

It would be more effective if a cross discipline solution is adopted and not just an ESRC social sciences solution. Could there be a cross research council national framework? Might UKRI encourage one or two institutions to develop a national research leadership development programme for all? Whatever is created needs to take into account existing provision and existing gaps.

b. Are there gaps or opportunities missed with this proposition?

There is the critical issue of enrolment. Who is this for and how will people be selected to benefit from leadership development? The research councils could use their leverage to encourage institutions to provide training in this area as part of professional development, at all stages in the career ladder. Whatever national framework is designed, it should be possible to enter at any stage, so that it is not perceived as a fast-track for a chosen few.

When it comes to the application process for grants, centres, programmes etc., more attention should be paid to the credentials of those proposed to lead the research. Here, access to institutional and national level training might be seen as a positive when assessing applications. Likewise, large-grants, research centres, programmes etc, should be required to demonstrate how they will nurture research leadership opportunities. There is real benefit from working with good research leaders, but these benefits could be made more explicit.

3. What is the priority for immediate action?

a. Are early career researchers the key target audience or is there a more pressing need at other career stages?

As identified in the consultation document, there are many schemes specifically targeting ECRs. The priority for this work therefore falls in the transition from mid to senior career development schemes. In particular, appointment to a professorship tends to be seen as the end rather than the beginning of a journey. Mid-career researchers tend to be discipline-centric in order to gain the necessary publications, but they need to develop into engaging in larger, interdisciplinary awards. This will become crucial when current senior research leaders leave academia, which could happen in batches after each REF cycle.

4. Which bodies should be responsible for taking the development of research leadership forward?

a. Who would you want to see involved/represented in any new governance arrangements?

The preference would be for all of the research councils to work together to create a framework given the increasing emphasis on multidisciplinary grants. In addition, it would be useful to consider the Academy of Social Sciences, Advance HE, and individual learned societies. There needs to be equitable representation across the disciplines to ensure the different perspectives are taken in to account. This is especially the case with business and management where success rates are particularly low.

About the Chartered ABS

The Chartered ABS is the voice of the UK's business and management education sector and our members consist of 121 business schools and higher education providers across the UK, as well as affiliate stakeholders, corporate members and international partners.

The UK's business and management education sector represents 1 in 5 university students and contributes £3.25bn to the UK economy. Its management students go on to lead global businesses and its entrepreneurs contribute to our dynamic economy. Its research has an impact across society and helps to turn our capacity for invention into viable businesses.

While MBAs may enjoy the highest profile of all business school programmes, they make up a very small proportion of what business schools do. In terms of student numbers, MBAs make up less than 5% of the over 325,000 students studying in business schools in the UK, and this doesn't take in to account short programmes, often offered under the umbrella of Executive Education, which caters for an increasing number of open and bespoke programmes delivered to employees in both large and small firms.