

ESRC Doctoral Training Centres: Response

The Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) is the learned society and professional body for geography in the UK. We welcome this opportunity to provide input to the review of the ESRC Doctoral Training Centres ahead of the recommissioning process.

In preparing this response, we solicited input from all geography departments across the UK (those involved and not involved in the current ESRC DTCs) and also draw on points and issues raised during the ESRC International Benchmarking Review of Human Geography (2012-13)¹. Specifically these relate to the support provided by DTCs for **overseas fieldwork** and **alternative models for postgraduate training** (e.g. 3+1) to support Early Career Researchers who find themselves in increasingly precarious employment positions post PhD.

A number of respondents cautioned that it remains early to comment on the strengths/weaknesses and future developments of the DTCs given the DTCs have not yet produced a full cohort of students from entry to graduation.

1) Strengths of the current DTC network model

Departments who are included in ESRC DTCs responded that

- The **quality** of prospective doctoral students is now higher, as a result of the increased competition between social science disciplines and there are **economies of scale**
- Encouraging PhD students to understand their work in a **multidisciplinary environment**, to work with students in other disciplines as part of a cohort, and to draw on expertise and training provision from fields beyond their own (particularly significant when the numbers within a specific school might be small) all are positive features of the programme. The ESRC funding to enable **multidisciplinary PhD funding and training** was specifically commended
- Enhancing multidisciplinary **connections between institutions** also is valuable. This has the potential for significant benefits for postgraduate supervision and training as well as for research itself (for example, through events, conferences as well as collaborative projects);
- **Pooling teaching expertise** from across the DTC in providing research training is advantageous as is encouraging **collaboration with external organisations** (where appropriate);
- Encouraging **advanced training events** that reflect research strengths at particular DTCs, while opening them to people from other institutions is a strength;
- The DTCs enable PhD funding to go to the **strongest applications**, with flexibility as to whether these are 1+3 or +3
- However, **others were more cautionary** and stated that the new system does not appear significantly better in terms of teaching, learning, and research with PGR students and the collaborations promised, particularly beyond institutions, have not materialised.
- In those institutions with a **disciplinary pathway**, this was stressed as a **key** part of success. Both because this allows a level of expert scrutiny and also ensures a level of disciplinary (and interdisciplinary) diversity. Respondents from the Scottish DTC identified this specifically as critical in engaging near and distant institutions and drawing on past collaborations/programmes (Kindrogan), the latter providing added value to the ESRC DTC.
- Responses from departments in institutions **not included in** the ESRC DTCs were much more **critical** (see comments below in weaknesses).

2) Weaknesses of the current DTC network model

- **Additional administrative burden.** A lot of work has been put into new structures, with significant additional administration for overseeing the organization and management. This has been eased in some institutions by the recruitment of dedicated administrative staff but this incurs additional cost.

¹ http://www.esrc.ac.uk/images/Human-Geography-Benchmarking-Review-Report_tcm8-25257.pdf

- The emphasis on collaboration, which is positive, needs time to build, and places extraordinary new **demands on undergraduates applying** for 1+3 funding. Too much is demanded too much too early from pre-masters applicants.
- **Lack of flexibility** regarding the 1+3 or +3 routes: some students come with significant Masters level research training completed but do not officially qualify for +3 and so have to take another MRes. In such cases, flexibility to allow the completion of required training in the first year, or as part of a half year extra funding, might be more appropriate than another full master's degree.
- There is some speculation that institutions have sought to **maximise the number of PhDs funded** by not funding 1+3 studentships and focused rather on **3 year studentships**. We encourage ESRC to review this.
- Others noted that the emphasis given to research methods training in general risks repeating skills training from earlier degrees, at the **expense of more substantive engagement with subjects**, including those of a more disciplinary nature.
- **Large team-taught research methods classes** of the kind that the DTC structure requires are **challenging to deliver** effectively given the very wide range of experiences and levels, and smaller and more focused classes can be more effective for student training.
- In the **ESRC IBR Human Geography discussions, suggestions were made about allowing 3+1** funding, given the precarious nature of post PhD funding and career paths. We encourage ESRC to give consideration to this alongside other support for the immediate post-PhD period.
- **Disciplinary representation**. In those institutions running DTCs without disciplinary pathways, concern was expressed about disciplines no longer having subject-specific ESRC student quota at School level. This may be particularly problematic for geography depending on the institutional structures (schools, colleges etc) where the discipline finds itself (science, social science, arts and humanities). We ask ESRC to review the **disciplinary spread of studentships within and across DTCs**.

Responses from those in institutions not part of DTCs

- Strong statements were made that the DTCs have **disadvantaged students** who are in institutions or departments that are not part of a DTC. Comments were made that of the DTC workshops and other programmes advertised very few are running activities that are open to others. We encourage ESRC to review the extent to which this is happening.
- Comments were also made re the **types of institutions included** and their **geographical distribution** (with a perceived London/ SE bias) which may not reflect ESRC grant funding strengths or other markers of expertise such as REF or international recognition. We encourage the review group to look at this as part of the current process.
- Further consequences of the current scheme also were highlighted; specifically the impact of not being in a DTC in terms of implications for applying for large grants/centres as a PhD studentship cannot be attached to such a bid.
- **The Scottish DTC** - Specific concerns were expressed about the dozen or so Scottish Government studentships. These draw 60% of their funding from the ESRC but there is no academic oversight over the selection of topics; topics are set by the Scottish Government according to their own strategic priorities. Academics from universities across the UK are asked to bid for these. But the demand relative to the other pathway and open competitions is very low partly because academics are there purely in a service capacity, having had no input in framing the topic or determining its academic significance. This is of a concern when it represents such a major stream of ESRC studentship funding. It is therefore important that some sort of mechanism is put in place that allows for a dialogue between the Government and universities before these topics are finally set.

- Comments were also made that the current framework has been exclusionary and had a seriously damaging effect on postgraduate recruitment as well as staff recruitment and career development to non-DTC universities. The current system is career-limiting for scholars working in non-DTCs and potentially barring students from accessing PhD supervision from the best qualified supervisors in their field. Strong recommendations were made that opportunities should be provided for **new DTCs to be formed** in the next round.
 - Suggestions were also made, that while recognising the benefits of critical mass in research training, once research training is completed, doctoral supervision could take place where the relevant expert in the field is located; i.e. **appropriate experts should be able to supervise ESRC studentships whether they are based in a DTC or not** (e.g. attached to wider research projects).
- 3) Key points to consider when developing and commissioning a new DTC network in relation to the disciplinary area that you represent
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- **Overseas fieldwork** is an integral part of many geography doctoral studies, with additional costs.
 - As part of the ESRC IBR of Human Geography, numerous concerns were raised about the support for overseas fieldwork through the DTCs and the unevenness of such support. We encourage reporting on this issue to provide an **evidence base of provision**. Similar attention should also be directed to language training. This is particularly important to enhance/sustain the international nature and research of ESRC funded doctoral research.
 - The length of time spent in the field by geography doctoral students and potential implications for completion times also needs to be considered. Also, attention is needed to ensure this does not conflict with the completion of training programmes at home institutions and whether in fact time in the field can count towards DT assessment requirements
 - A specific issue for geography, but relevant to other disciplines too, is the need for the DTC network to appreciate the **diversity of the subject and its existing connections with other research councils**, and to facilitate the opportunities those connections provide (for example, through potential funding for cross research council initiatives).
 - Recognition of the importance of **broad methodological training**, but particularly with quantitative methods, and geocomputational methods both at advanced and more general levels.
 - The **amount of time for training** to ensure the time students need to commit to DT programmes do not detract from research and that the class-based doctoral research training, its delivery, implementation and assessment is geared around individual students' needs and necessary for the research they undertake.
 - **Size of DTCs**. Encouragement to consider this and to avoid very large DTC networks. Keeping them relatively small allows for genuine multidisciplinary connections to be made and developed, and for the systems to be more responsive to local needs without requiring overly large bureaucratic structures;
- 4) Any other points related to the terms of reference
- There is a general consensus that time is needed for the **existing system to establish itself**. Careful consideration should be given to the unintended consequences of major structural changes.
 - We are sure that this is part of ESRC's standard procedures, but we would ask data be collected on participation by **historically under-represented groups** in the social sciences in the DTCs.

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