

Academy of Social Sciences welcomes ESRC response to the Review of social science PhDs

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The Academy of Social Sciences welcomes the [ESRC](#)
[response to the Review of social science PhDs](#)

Here are some of the specific points that we welcome:

- Strengthening the Training Needs Analysis to be carried out for each student, to support the development both of deeper skills and the flexible pathways needed to meet students' needs.
- Further support for data and number skills (including digital methods and quantitative training), using the Training Needs Analysis to address both basic and advanced skills (through, for instance, more intensive courses, and working with Learned Societies to enhance subject-specific methodological training), while recognising existing strengths in qualitative methods and the need for all students to deepen their understanding of a range of research designs.
- The introduction of a 'Research in Practice' component, including both training in wider skills (for instance about communication and increasing research impact) and the opportunity for PhD students to have 3 month work or intern placements in academia, business, policy or third sector organisations. This should diversify and strengthen employability of social science PhDs.
- More emphasis on Doctoral Training Programmes (DTPs) having concrete plans for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, including ring-fenced funding where appropriate. [The ESRC-commissioned Review](#) highlighted important issues here, especially with regard to the under-representation of Black students, of women in some disciplines, and of those undertaking part-time study (where students tend to be older and in work).
- Extending standard ESRC funding to 3.5 years, to allow for the Research in Practice component and time for additional training, with flexibility for longer funding in some cases. The ESRC acknowledges the Review recommendation for 4 years of funding but notes the trade-off with the number of PhDs that can be funded. Meanwhile, the ESRC will emphasise scoping PhD projects so that, with well-developed project management, they can realistically be completed within 3.5 years, rather than encouraging students to spend long periods of unfunded time in writing up their research.

AcSS believes that, in time, the ESRC should get additional funding for social science PhDs, to include continuing developments in training, and eventual extension of funding for 4 years. The UK's international comparators will not stand still. While the UK record on social science PhD completion rates is very high and needs to be maintained, the consensus on the importance of appropriate and flexible pathways that include deeper training is well set out in the ESRC-commissioned Review of evidence.

We note that the ESRC funds only about one fifth of UK social science PhDs (see the Review, p.11), and a somewhat smaller proportion of first year entrants to social science PhDs. AcSS believes the changes to ESRC-funded PhDs can also help strengthen non-funded PhDs and that many of the practical proposals can and should be applied for the benefit of all social science PhD students.

These could include, for example:

- Stronger initial Training Needs Analysis for each entrant, to ensure suitable training.
- Greater attention to data and number skills in training, and in research design, as with ESRC-funded PhDs.
- Appropriate opportunities for interdisciplinary work.
- Consideration of intermediate assessment of training elements other than final thesis or publication outputs, as recommended by the Review
- The proposed steps to support supervisory excellence, including ways to help scope and manage PhD projects so that they can be completed in timely way
- Deeper and more subject-specific careers guidance, as recommended in the Review, so that better information about employment outside higher education is available. This will help improve university employability statistics as well.

Finally, AcSS welcomes the transparency of the process by which the ESRC has undertaken the Review, and its use of robust evidence.

We look forward to developments of these proposals in the next year, alongside commissioning of DTPs and working with Learned Societies.

