

## A new binary divide? Social science after concentration, and how to cope...

### Perri 6

The national press largely missed the huge significance for higher education of the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC's) announcement in January that it will now support doctoral training in just twenty one centres. (<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/guidance/postgraduates/doctoral-training-centres.aspx>). Some of these are made up of consortia of universities. Many universities which had high hopes of being awarded a centre were unsuccessful. Moreover, ESRC decided, after seeing the Treasury's announcements of cuts in the Council's funding, not to fund any smaller Doctoral Training Units at all. Those would have covered fewer disciplines and smaller numbers of students than the Centres. Typically, smaller universities not in consortia and post-1992 universities applied for those.

This decision is the harbinger of a much deeper degree of concentration that could lead to a stark, new division in the sector between research and teaching universities – at least in the social sciences, and in all probability quite generally. That, of course, would probably be the preference of the Russell Group anyway. It has implications for the Research Excellence Framework (REF), for 'Quality Related' (QR) research funding awarded in consequence of the REF, for the future of ESRC itself, for academics' decisions about their careers, and for the choice of university that students make even for their undergraduate courses, let alone for their master's courses.

Let's start with what ESRC has done, before examining what it will definitely mean, and then considering a little more speculatively what it might mean – if we are not careful. To understand the scale of what has happened, it's important to understand how the system has worked until this year.

### The previous system

Until this year, a wide swathe of universities was 'recognised' by ESRC for doctoral training in at least some disciplines, typically those in which they had achieved at least reasonable profiles in the Research Assessment Exercise. A minority was given quotas of studentships to award to their students as they saw fit. Rather more could enter applications for individuals in the open competition for studentships, but in recent years ESRC had already cut the number of studentships available in the open competition. Many universities which were recognised but not given quota awards were successful in securing ESRC support for the special programme of doctoral studentships funded for projects undertaken jointly between universities and other organisations (businesses, public authorities, charities, etc) known as 'CASE'.

ESRC announced in 2009 that it would replace this system, partly for the unarguable reason that it was very bureaucratic and time-consuming, and in larger part to pursue greater concentration. The Council first issued plans for a two-tier structure of larger Centres and smaller Units, envisaging that Units would source specialist advanced training for individual students who needed it from nearby Centres. Centres would have quotas, but Units would not. Units would, however, have continued to be able to enter the open competition for individual students and would of course have had ESRC's *imprimatur* for the quality of their methods training.

### The decision

In the end, only Centres were funded. Not a single Unit was supported. The Centre consortia that were successful did not include a single post-1992 university. But many famous names lost out from among the civic, redbrick and Robbins-era universities too. The list of universities with shares in DTCs conspicuously does not include, for example, Leicester, Loughborough, Salford and Bradford.

After the government cuts in the Council's budget, decisions were delayed. A second review of applications was carried out, and for this, ESRC raised the threshold. The Council claims that it did not introduce any new criteria after applications had been submitted. But many people have concluded from both ESRC's published report and from the assessments given to unsuccessful applicant universities that this might not be the whole story. There have been suggestions that some of the very things ESRC encouraged DTU applicants to show – such as sourcing specialist advanced training for nearby Centres – were in fact held against them. ESRC is by no means the only research council to have introduced this kind of concentration. Indeed, we can expect that most will do so.

ESRC has said that there will be another doctoral training centre accreditation exercise in 2015, but that it will not be a 'full' one. We do not yet know what that means. In particular, it is not clear whether it will be open to all those universities which were unsuccessful in 2011 to apply again, perhaps in quite new consortia.

### **The new concentration**

The final award of just 21 Doctoral Training Centres was accompanied by other announcements from ESRC. Each pushes forward the concentration agenda in quite dramatic ways. The Council has skewed the distribution of quota awards of studentships among the DTCs toward its priority disciplines rather more clearly. The priorities favour economics, business studies, quantitative social science and, to some degree, interdisciplinary work. Secondly, the Council has published a set of empirical topics that it will prioritise, both in research grants and in doctoral support and more generally ([http://www.esrc.ac.uk/\\_images/ESRC%20Delivery%20Plan%202011-15\\_tcm8-13455.pdf](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/_images/ESRC%20Delivery%20Plan%202011-15_tcm8-13455.pdf)). Thirdly, it has announced restrictions on research grant applications, not the least of which is the ending of the smaller grants programme and of any grants of less than £200,000 (see the Delivery Plan above, but see also the paper on options for demand management [http://www.bradford.ac.uk/gateway/media/Gateway/Documents/ESRC\\_Discussion\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.bradford.ac.uk/gateway/media/Gateway/Documents/ESRC_Discussion_Paper.pdf)). Those smaller grants had often been the route by which early career researchers got onto the first rung of the research career ladder, and had also been taken up by smaller universities and by post-1992 universities' centres of excellence.

ESRC has also calculated the numbers of doctoral students awarded in quotas to each centre on the basis of a formula which follows RAE2008 results and other ESRC grant income. The effect is still further to concentrate resources.

Some universities – and especially redbrick and Robbins-era ones – which were unsuccessful have told Times Higher Education that they are considering appealing (“Spurned universities may appeal as ESRC concentrates doctoral cash”, THE, 3<sup>rd</sup> February, Paul Jump). But ESRC provides no appeal mechanism. Nor is there any appeal, in the strict sense, available in the courts. The only route in the courts is by way of judicial review. The criteria under which a court may quash a public body's decision are narrow. Moreover, courts now very rarely substitute their own decision for one they quash. Rather, they usually ask the public body – in this case, the Council – to make a fresh decision. That means that it is very often open to them to make a decision with the same substantive outcome but providing a different set of reasons that are acceptable to the court. So it is not clear that the aggrieved universities can be confident that

even a technical victory would lead to the restoration of their accreditation.

### **What concentration means**

Combining concentration in doctoral training and research grant funding with concentration in QR funding (which itself has been increased in the public spending cuts, even under Labour before the 2010 election) means that in the social sciences, Britain is moving rapidly and decisively toward a two-tier university system. There will be universities regarded by funding councils as ones in which taxpayer support for staff research and doctoral research will be concentrated, and... well, ... others.

If the first group comprises mainly those in the consortia making up the 21 centres, which do not include many famous names among redbrick and Robbins-era universities, then this will look very different indeed from the pre-1992 division between universities and polytechnics. It is a quite new division.

It could – but need not necessarily – grow into a division between research and teaching universities. Indeed, if the increased fees for bachelor's level degrees have the effect of reducing demand for master's degrees too, because students are unwilling to incur yet more debt, and if master's level qualifications come to be seen (as they often were in the 1960s and 1970s) as of value mainly as gateways to doctoral studies, then concentration could even produce a division between undergraduate-only and full undergraduate and postgraduate universities.

But it may not work out quite like that.

What is clear is that the next generation of academics in the social sciences will be recruited, even more heavily than is already the case, from those who have completed their training in a very small number of universities. Universities which are not supported by ESRC for doctoral training will presumably continue to award PhDs, but they will expect, over time, to recruit steadily fewer of their junior academic staff from among their own PhD students or from other universities in the part of the sector which has no research council support for doctoral training.

Moreover, those people who want academic careers with any research activity in their portfolio at all will seek, if possible, to get into universities with Doctoral Training Centres. They will fear that taking posts in other universities could mark them out as being destined for a teaching-only career – or at least one in which research is conducted at weekends and without funding, as used to be the case in the polytechnics before 1992. Universities without doctoral training centres which want to retain a presence in research will find it harder to recruit ambitious staff.

Even if a future government or HEFCE leadership were to look more favourably than the present one upon the 'pockets of excellence' that were revealed in RAE2008, concentration of doctoral training support will make it much more difficult to sustain those 'pockets' in the social sciences.

Fewer ESRC doctoral studentships, fewer bursaries from other sources, the likely effect of higher fees for bachelor level degrees on people's willingness to take out loans to pay their own fees and maintenance through doctoral studies – it seems quite possible that, even without concentration, there will be fewer PhDs awarded over the next decade or so. At the very least, it seems likely that many more people will get their first teaching job without a PhD, even if they are expected to undertake doctoral studies before they can expect promotion.

What of those who cannot get studentships in a DTC but still want a PhD? Will they typically prefer, if they must pay their own fees or if they have funding from overseas, a PhD from

a university that has a DTC, on the grounds that its PhDs will have the cachet of ESRC's imprimatur that others do not? ESRC obviously hopes that this will be the case, so deepening concentration by standard-setting as well as by funding.

On the other hand, if demand by self-funding doctoral students holds up better than we might fear, there are likely still to be many people who will not be accepted by the universities with DTCs. Those with non-standard, lower qualifications, those with disciplinary or empirical interests which lie outside ESRC's priority areas, perhaps even those who positively prefer to do their doctoral research in smaller academic communities and for whom concentration does not offer an attractive experience, may well continue to look to other universities.

### **What it means for ESRC**

That there will be protest against ESRC's decision about doctoral training is hardly in doubt. That it will be successful is very doubtful. In any case, the decision about doctoral training is part of a much larger programme of concentration. In part, it is only the latest – if most dramatic – stage in reinforcing a policy of concentration that has been going on with QR funding for some years. Since the previous Labour government announced its cuts in higher education funding, HEFCE has been directed to begin departing from its previous policy of using QR to fund research excellence wherever the RAE found it. Scale now matters there too. ESRC had held out until recently against pushing concentration very forcefully but it has now given way.

More fundamental for ESRC is that it has given way on formula funding. This is something that the Treasury has been pressing it to do for several years. Indeed, when Gordon Brown was still Chancellor, the Treasury published a White Paper proposing to replace the RAE with formula-based funding for QR money. The previous ESRC recognition exercise was the point at which ESRC conceded that it would allocate quota awards on the basis of a formula. The new formula has an even steeper gradient for concentration toward RAE2008 highly starred work and existing patterns of ESRC funding.

The problem for ESRC is that it must be raising questions in the minds of Treasury officials about the research councils themselves. For if funding for doctoral training can be allocated on the basis of a formula, and if ESRC is now prepared to say – as it has in justifying its selection of the 21 centres – that these are the only ones with research 'environments' sufficiently strong to justify funding for doctoral training, then the Treasury will surely ask, "why not extend the principle of formula based funding?". Indeed, if just 21 consortia of universities have shown that they have enough worthwhile research to justify public money, then the Treasury will surely be asking why Britain needs the apparatus of the REF to award QR money to them, and the Research Councils to award project and programme grants to them. The Treasury will surely now want to ask why it would not be simpler and cheaper to direct all research funding to that group by formula, and cut out the rest entirely.

Interestingly, they have not forced that issue through yet. The university funding settlement letter from the Secretary of State and the higher education minister to HEFCE makes clear that the Department is committed to the REF. That will have been cleared with the Treasury.

It requires no great leap of imagination to suspect, though, that the Treasury may be thinking of this REF as the last chance for universities now outside the charmed circle to get a toehold in it, and then, if they are successful in a future ESRC accreditation exercise for doctoral training, benefit from the formula which will by then use REF outcomes rather than RAE2008 ones. However, by the time of the REF, the wider concentration agenda may well make it almost impossible for the 'pockets of excellence' to be sustained anyway.

## What universities left in the cold can do now

It is too late now to ask for a debate about the principle of concentration of research funding, of doctoral training, of research excellence. It has probably gone so far now that it is irreversible, even if a government were to come to power at the next general election which disapproved of it. In any case, Labour is as committed to concentration as the parties in the coalition, and there is no reason to expect that to change much.

The challenge for those universities which have no share in a DTC for the social sciences is to adapt, and, if at all possible to find ways to maintain a presence in research and in doctoral training, despite the difficulties that HEFCE and ESRC are, at government behest, putting in their way. Obviously, this will not be easy. And scaling up from 'pockets' will presumably be much more difficult than it was in the last decade and a half. But it will still be possible to maintain some level of research and doctoral training in the social sciences outside the magic circle of the 21.

The universities without DTCs in the social sciences are by no means just the post-1992 group. There are many old civic and 1960s universities in exactly the same position. Their chances of securing a DTC the next time that ESRC runs a full accreditation exercise are now no greater, but also no less, than those of the post-1992s.

### *Persist!*

There are very good reasons for universities not in DTCs to continue their doctoral programmes.

First, postgraduate student numbers are not capped, whereas undergraduate numbers are capped, and will surely continue to be for some years. Indeed, the government has said the cap on undergraduate numbers could become even tighter if many universities charge the full £9000 annual fee. Master's and doctoral programmes represent a potential growth area. It used to be said that demand for undergraduate courses was at least predictable, whereas supposedly that for graduate programmes was not. But in the age of fees for first degrees of between £6000 and £9000 per year, projections of undergraduate numbers too now come with very wide bands of uncertainty.

Second, ESRC's decisions leave wide areas of the social sciences in which it has sharply reduced its interest in funding, but where students will still be interested in doing research. ESRC's new priority empirical areas are likely to be applied much more prescriptively than the 'themes' of the last decade were, in the selection of grants and probably even in the retrospective oversight of how DTCs allocate their quota awards of studentships. Other empirical fields and indeed the disciplines in which ESRC is now less interested will still attract students. Indeed, international students in particular may continue to be interested in a wider range of topics and disciplines.

Third, there will continue to be students who positively want to study in smaller programmes, and who may find either the more dirigiste character of the doctoral programmes that will meet ESRC's requirements in Centres not to their taste, or may simply prefer to be among fewer people. Indeed, many students continue to be attracted to carry out doctoral work with a particular individual academic whose work inspires them. Importantly, the DTCs have accepted, for their funding, in some respects rather closer specification and supervision of the content and organisation of their doctoral programmes than they have had to face in the past. Those students who want something more flexible may well be attracted elsewhere.

Fourth – and perhaps of greatest importance to vice-chancellors – universities which have



no share in a DTC will have a greater chance of attracting academic staff in future, if they do not rely on people trained in DTCs who for some reason cannot get jobs in DTC universities. Sustaining their doctoral programmes will provide them with some of their most promising recruiting grounds.

Finally, for those who see the REF – and perhaps especially if it is the last REF to be held – as a final chance to secure their areas of research excellence, then maintaining their doctoral programmes is a vital component of strategy.

### ***Form alliances!***

Many of the universities which have secured DTCs have been able to do so only in consortia. Under ESRC's criteria, that is probably due more to the fact that alone they would have lacked the range of disciplines with sufficiently strong RAE2008 scores, than it is to any limitations in the range or quality of their research methods training. The reason that many universities without a share in a DTC will probably need to form consortia will be the reverse of that which drove the successful DTC applicants. Most of this group will more likely need to pool their research training capabilities, in order to achieve the necessary breadth. Greater ability to put together supervisory teams with precisely the right research expertise is also a benefit of being in a consortium, but it will probably be a secondary one for universities outside the DTC circle.

However, because money for doctoral programmes outside the DTC circle will be tight, it will be important to pool some administrative costs across consortia. These may include advertising and recruitment, financial administration, perhaps even appeals administration.

### ***Specialise!***

ESRC's new priorities mean that taxpayer support for doctoral research is now much more heavily concentrated than before on applied rather than pure social science, on issues of direct policy relevance for central government or strategic interest for large businesses, and on projects that can sit within the penumbra of major programmes of staff research (such as big quantitative data collection). That leaves a great deal of social science to be done elsewhere. The rest of social science will not, and certainly need not, die in Britain just because ESRC is much less interested in it.

This opens up opportunities for universities outside the DTC circle to specialise in quite other areas and to appeal to doctoral students with a much wider range of disciplinary and empirical interests.

### ***The exception: business and management***

There is one area which should be excepted from the injunction to specialise in areas of lesser interest to ESRC. That is the field of business and management studies. ESRC continues to attach importance to the field, as we should expect. But when economic growth returns to the corporate sector, in particular, both company support for professional doctorates and day-release support for self-funded doctoral studies will surely also increase. If the government gets the private-sector-led recovery that it wants, then much of the demand for higher level qualifications generally and for degrees by research in particular will be around business. Many of the universities outside the DTC sector have strong and successful business schools. In this area, then, it makes sense for them to compete directly with the DTCs for self-funded research students and those with some degree of employer support.

### ***Take calculated risks!***

In fields of research which are of less interest to ESRC, universities without DTCs should be prepared to take some calculated risks in supporting projects that may not be safe enough for

DTCs to accept, given the completion measures they will need to show ESRC by the next accreditation exercise in order to retain their DTC. To demonstrate their innovation and to appeal to future potential doctoral students, universities outside the DTC circle will have to be prepared to take some calculated risks on ambitious projects in fields in which they have staff expertise.

### ***Appeal to international students!***

International students do not just pay higher fees. They also have high completion rates. The DTCs will of course compete for international students by pointing to ESRC's *imprimatur*. Other universities will have to make their appeal by pointing to their emphasis on areas of specialisation which are quite distinct from those offered by the DTCs, in both disciplinary and in empirical terms. They will also have to emphasise the quality of the support and the kind of experience that the smaller organisational settings of their doctoral programmes can offer. That need not be incompatible with the imperative to form consortia, provided that it is supervisors who do most of the travelling rather than the doctoral students themselves.

### ***Focus on the needs of part-time students!***

Self-funding students are much more likely to conduct their doctoral studies on a part-time basis. ESRC has always been keener on full-time students, not just because they complete more quickly but also because completion rates are higher. The challenge for universities outside the DTC circle will be to reorganise their programmes to support part-time students in order to provide them with the support they need to ensure high completion rates.

### ***Grow your own!***

Universities without DTCs should make greater efforts to recruit their own master's students into doctoral programmes. They may have, over time, a higher chance of recruiting from this source than from master's programmes in universities with DTCs.

### **The next decade**

Government may well want to bring about a new and rigid division between a smaller group of research and graduate universities and a wider group of teaching universities and other organisations awarding bachelor level degrees.

But it may not get what it wants. Demand for master's degrees and doctoral studies may well be sustained across a much wider range of universities than ministers in 2011 believe they want. In part, that may well be because the tighter labour market we face over the next decade will put a premium on higher qualifications, despite students' need to borrow to pay for them. Demand for part-time doctoral research will surely grow, as a proportion of the total, not least from those who would in earlier years have been able to secure an ESRC studentship or a university bursary but whose chances of those things will now be much lower.

The kinds of social science in which ESRC is showing less interest will remain centrally important internationally, and will continue to appeal to many who want to do doctoral study.

If the Treasury were, in the next Parliament, to persuade the government to end the REF, to end the dual funding system for research, and to substitute formula funding for all research to a small number of universities – presumably a membership list very similar to the one showing those with shares in DTCs – then indeed, we shall have a new “binary divide” in the sector, of a quite different nature and quite different extent from that which dominated before 1992. Probably, such an outcome would not greatly displease the Russell Group, although they would surely have the decency to wring their hands in public.

That is not yet inevitable. From ministers' point of view, it is a strategy that has some risks. Such a cosy relationship with a privileged few institutions might be open to political attack. For Conservatives, the result would hardly look much like a free market, for by then all the competition to get the prizes would be in the past. Middle-class voting parents who find their teenage children unable to get places for bachelor's degrees in universities fully supported for research might well grow very annoyed. From the research councils' perspective, it would be a disaster. They would simply have helped to put themselves out of a job. The rest of the sector would face the challenge of trying to recruit and motivate staff without being able to offer any prospect of research or doctoral supervision. Some will of course be happy to make careers from teaching alone: that has always been true. But it is an open question whether they will be sufficiently numerous to support the size of higher education sector that voters will expect and demand.

The social sciences in Britain have a lean decade ahead. But if social science in Britain is restricted to a small club of universities concentrating only on the sort of social science that government believes most valuable, then concentration alone will not sustain the fertility of ideas, the range of work or the risk-taking that continue to be necessary if Britain is avoid falling far behind the rest of the world in social science. Although for the next decade, concentration will redefine the sector, it is quite possible that in a decade from now, more searching questions may be asked – even by politicians – about its limits.

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