

## **Department of Business, Innovation and Skills Triennial Review of the Research Councils**

### **Written evidence submitted by the Political Studies Association of the UK**

1. The Political Studies Association is the leading organisation in the UK linking academics in political science and current affairs, theorists and practitioners, policy-makers, journalists, researchers and students in higher education.
2. Membership of the Political Studies Association is open to everyone interested in the study of politics. It spans academics in political science and current affairs, theorists and practitioners, policy-makers, journalists, researchers, politics teachers and students in higher education. Membership has grown steadily and now stands at over 1700, making it the second largest such national association in the world

#### **Topic 1: Structure, Governance and Coordination of the Research Councils**

3. We support the dual funding system in which Research Councils support specific research infrastructure, research projects and programmes, and postgraduate research training, while Funding Councils provide non-specific research funding to universities.
4. We emphasise the need and value of ESRC as a free-standing council attuned to needs of research in the social sciences and its scope for research impact for social and economic benefit, the latter focused in particular on the public sector. ESRC provides necessary support for original research and the development of research capacity on the dimensions and consequences of social change in the UK and internationally. It also provides a necessary complement to natural, engineering and medical scientific councils in order to bring full awareness to research design and dissemination of the social context of technological change. As David Willetts put it in 2011: "Quite simply, the humanities and social sciences are essential to a civilised country. They bring deep fulfilment to us personally. They often give meaning and shape to our lives" <sup>1</sup>.

#### **Topic 2: Research Councils and Other Funders**

5. We favour sharing of information between funders (within the UK and internationally) in order to avoid unnecessary overlap in funding offers but we welcome the diverse directions that various funding bodies pursue and see such pluralism as the best route to a social science research agenda that is open to new ideas and matters and makes a difference to society and economy.

#### **Topic 3: Relationship to those that are Funded and Customers of Research**

6. We welcome the efforts that the ESRC make to support the impact of research and recognise the increasing efforts being made across the sector to make research accessible and useable. We would though welcome more and better opportunities for dialogue with ESRC and other Research Councils to ensure the research community

fully understands and gives support to those efforts. We also support efforts to engage users of research in discussions on how to make research processes and findings more usable to them. We nonetheless note the value to society of what is often called ‘blue skies’ research which does not necessarily have obvious short term application, but which may in the longer term produce major social benefit.

7. For this reason we favour a clear commitment to ESRC and other RCUK funding in ‘response mode’ so that ideas and innovations can be driven from the bottom up by the researcher community as well as steered from top down according to defined strategic priorities. So we recommend that at least 50% of ESRC funding for research is dedicated to response mode projects. We recommend also that learned societies are seen and used better as key informants in periodic exercises by ESRC and other Research Councils in defining strategic priorities.
8. As for those that receive funding from ESRC we know from our 2012 survey of the political science profession that two thirds of respondents had applied for funding in the last two years, many on multiple occasions. The ESRC was the top external source of funding applications and 7 out of 10 regard ESRC grant funding as essential to their research activities. The main barriers to getting funding were seen as time constraints due to other demands and the sheer level of competition for limited funds. About a quarter of the profession did however think research funding was “a closed shop” accessible to particular types of research and particular types of institutions. We would be happy to build on the findings of this and other surveys to help communicate better to our researcher community the opportunities and constraints that exist around ESRC funding. Ultimately Research Councils need a strong sense of legitimacy in their researcher communities, and fuller dialogue with learned societies may be a useful – and is certainly an under-exploited – way of securing this.

Professor Charlie Jeffery (Chair) and Professor Gerry Stoker  
Political Studies Association of the UK

28<sup>th</sup> February 2013

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-arts-humanities-and-social-sciences-in-the-modern-university>