MethodsNews

ESRC National Centre for

Research Methods

Director's Corner
Chris Skinner, Director

The National Centre for Research Methods enters a new phase of its development in 2008 as the first six nodes that were commissioned in 2005 move towards completion of their three-year programmes of work, and are succeeded by seven "phase II nodes" (2008-11).

In fact, there is an element of continuity in this transition as four of the phase II nodes arise from successful bids by teams from phase I nodes to develop their work in new directions. They are joined by three teams that are completely new to the NCRM and will introduce new coverage of methodological developments associated with simulation, administrative data and qualitative software. Fuller details are included elsewhere in this issue of *Methods News* where it can be seen that the methodological and substantive foci of the NCRM have evolved, while at the same time maintaining the Centre's commitment to the development of a wide range of research methods across the social sciences.

In phase II as in phase I there are some fascinating combinations of disciplinary and methodological affiliations in each of the nodes, and some exciting ideas about how to promote research at the cutting edge of developments. Bringing these deliberately diverse elements together as parts of the Centre promises to facilitate all sorts of innovative thinking and practice in both research and training and capacity building, and this will be supported by the NCRM hub with its particular responsibilities for promoting collaboration within and beyond the Centre. We hope that the many members of the UK social science community who are already familiar with the NCRM will keep abreast of the new opportunities that phase II provides, and that others who have not yet participated will join them

Viewpoint
Louise Corti, Associate Director, UKDA

In a drive to promote data sharing, the UK Data Archive (UKDA) contacted Research Ethics Committees (RECs) within UK universities in January 2008 to highlight the tensions between data protection and data sharing. The UKDA works to administer data sharing policies of various UK research funders, while newly formed RECs within universities are seeking to prevent potential misuse of personal information as undertaken by research with human subjects.

Although the need to protect personal data and preserve confidentiality cannot be overstated, the UKDA is increasingly concerned about the number of research projects maintaining that they are unable to share data due to a lack of agreed consent. As the designated national centre for preservation and dissemination of these data, one of the roles of the UKDA is to provide guidance to researchers on data creation strategies and management, particularly in the key area of informed consent.

Most research funders are increasingly keen on maximising the potential use of primary data created in the course of publicly funded research. The ESRC, for example, contractually requires all its award holders to make any research outputs resulting from the award accessible to others, and offer any resulting data for archiving and sharing, with such materials being prepared accordingly. This needs to be taken into account when designing consent forms. Consent forms should not prohibit sharing, archiving and re-use of data once confidentiality has been assured. Indeed, consent forms may point out the strategies used by researchers to ensure appropriate confidentiality and how data will be used and stored.

The UKDA is currently working with a number of RECs to provide explicit guidance notes alerting researchers to the contractual obligations of funding agencies to share data with other researchers. The UKDA is also revising its guidance on consent and confidentiality and is hosting a series of training workshops on this topic. The first two workshops on the use of consent forms and anonymisation strategies were held in March 2008 as part of ESRC Festival of

Social Science. ESDS staff also met with the Head of the National Health Service (NHS) Research Ethics Service which oversees the process of Medical Research Ethics applications and evaluation by RECs to discuss how guidance might be provided to help those completing ethics forms. Three more workshops are being held in London and Edinburgh in June. UKDA workshop details:
http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/news/forthcomingevents.asp
http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/news/pastevents.asp

Focus on the Hub

Bookings open! 3rd ESRC Research Methods Festival
St Catherine's College, Oxford, 30 June-3 July 2008

3rd ESRC Research Methods Festival
30 June - 3 July 2008 at St Catherine's College Oxford

Bookings for the third ESRC Research Methods Festival are now open and can be made via the NCRM website. The festival runs from 30 June to 3 July 2008 and will be held at St Catherine's College, Oxford. Its programme includes choices from 69 sessions that cover all aspects of developments in social science research methods. The festival delegates are social science researchers from all disciplines, all career stages, and all sectors.

Almost all sessions currently still have spaces available, but some are filling up quite quickly and bookings for these sessions will be closed when they reach capacity. The registration fees are very reasonable: £50/day including lunch (£30/day for UK-based PhD students). For more information and to book please go to http://www.ncrm.ac.uk .

The Hub conducting a training needs assessment of non-academic researchers in collaboration with the SRA

The NCRM has a remit to evaluate training needs in research methods among the social science research community in order to inform its national training programme and ESRC strategy more broadly.

Following an assessment of the training needs of academic researchers that was undertaken in 2005, we are currently undertaking an assessment of the training needs of social researchers working in non-academic settings (i.e. in the public, private and voluntary sectors as well as freelance researchers). In order to conduct this work we have been liaising with the Social Research Association (SRA) which is an organisation providing a forum for social research practitioners from all sectors. The assessment comprises an online survey of all SRA members, qualitative interviews with senior staff in 10 social research organisations across the sector and an analysis of job vacancies for social researchers over a six week period.

The Report of this assessment will be completed in October and will be made available on the NCRM website in December 2008.

The Fifth NCRM Call for Proposals for Networks for Methodological Innovation

The National Centre for Research Methods will be calling for proposals for Networks for Methodological Innovation projects in May 2008. The aim of this scheme is to enable networks of researchers to meet in order to stimulate debate and develop ideas in relation to methodological innovation. The scheme allows a series of events and related activities to be undertaken over a period of twelve months, commencing in April 2009. NCRM typically funds two projects per year, with a maximum budget of £25,000 per project. This year, applications are invited on methodological topics that relate to: interdisciplinary working; mixed methods and data integration; new forms of data and/or data collection; and finally, research evidence for policy. Applications are welcome from all social science disciplines. The closing date for applications is June 20th 2008. Further information and the application form will be available from May 6th 2008 from the National Centre for Research Methods website www.ncrm.ac.uk or from info@ncrm.ac.uk .

Focus on the Nodes

Graham Crow, Deputy Director, NCRM

As was noted in the Director's Corner, the process of commissioning nodes for the next phase of the NCRM's development has resulted in seven nodes being funded for the period 2008-11. It was with great excitement that the hub team welcomed the new and continuing node teams to a two-day meeting in Southampton on 7-8 February to discuss the evolution of the Centre into its second phase.

Taken in alphabetical order, ADMIN (Administrative data: methods, inference and network) is the first node, which will be directed by Lorraine Dearden of the Institute of Education. This node's programme of work reflects the increasing use being made of administrative data in a variety of policy-oriented research fields. It draws in particular on the potential that exists for bringing together these administrative data with survey data, so that each enhances the other by helping to overcome familiar difficulties related to the lack of information about important variables in administrative data and the potential for biases in survey data. This work has evident points of connection with that of the second node, BIAS II (Bayesian methods for integrated bias modelling and analysis of multiple data sources in observational studies). Directed by Nicky Best of Imperial College, this node will further develop applications of the methodology of hierarchical regression associated with its activities in the NCRM's phase 1. These developments take this agenda into new fields, both methodological (relating to longitudinal data, for example) and disciplinary (collaborating with psychologists and political scientists, for example).

The third phase 2 node is the Lancaster-Warwick-Stirling node, directed by Brian Francis of the University of Lancaster. This node's agenda is concerned with developing statistical modelling in the social sciences, and will build on work undertaken by the phase 1 Lancaster-Warwick node in developing and extending statistical methodology and models related to correlated and longitudinal data. These

methodological advances also have substantive applications across a wide range of disciplines, such as criminology, psychology and sociology. Nigel Fielding of the University of Surrey is the director of the fourth phase 2 node, QUIC (Qualitative innovations in CAQDAS), which is committed to the development of expertise in qualitative software. This node's agenda has two principal strands, promoting methodological innovations for computational support for qualitative and mixed methods research, and raising awareness of and skills in qualitative software use through its training and capacity building activities. The substantive focus of this node's research in the field of environmental risk highlights the applicability of these methods to various disciplines and also their relevance to policy-related analysis.

The Realities (Real life methods for researching relationalities) node is the fifth phase 2 node, directed by Jennifer Mason of the University of Manchester. This node develops and extends the work of the phase 1 node devoted to Real Life Methods, and seeks to continue to pioneer the research methods needed to capture the multi-dimensional character of personal lives in complex worlds. An important aspect of this agenda is to move beyond the so-called quantitative-qualitative divide, and in the process to promote consideration of the different logics of generalisation in the social sciences. Nigel Gilbert of the University of Surrey is the director of the sixth node, SIMIAN (Simulation innovation). Simulation methodology has been employed by various social scientists for some time, but the potential exists for its adoption to be far more widespread within the social science community. This node will promote this agenda through work on demonstrator simulations that show the relevance of this methodology to many different substantive areas of research. In addition, attention will also be focused on the challenges to the wider adoption of simulation methodology, so that obstacles to further innovation in this field may be tackled. The seventh phase 2 node is STRUCTURES (Structures for building, learning, applying and computing statistical models), which is directed by Jon Rasbash of the University of Bristol. This node is also known as Lemma 2, because it builds on the achievements of the phase 1 node Lemma in statistical modelling. Through analysis of specific substantive issues such as the extent of segregation in the UK education system and how this is changing, the broader potential of statistical models can be demonstrated. The node's agenda also includes demonstrating that this methodology can be employed by diverse members of the social science community.

This latter aim of bringing cutting-edge developments in research methodology to the attention of social scientists in all disciplines and at all career stages is one that is shared by all of the phase 2 nodes, reflecting the NCRM's commitment to promoting their ever-wider adoption, to the point at which they become part of mainstream research practice. This is a highly-ambitious objective, reflecting the importance attached to UK social scientists not only keeping abreast of the latest developments in research methods but also being among the foremost contributors to these developments. Individually the seven phase 2 nodes each has a significant part to play in facilitating the wider understanding and uptake of advances taking place. Their presence together in the NCRM, along with the co-ordinating role played by members of the hub team at

the University of Southampton, means that their combination and collaboration has far greater potential. The experience of what has been achieved to date during phase 1 of the NCRM in terms of both research and training and capacity building provides grounds for optimism that the activities of the various parts of the Centre, both individually and in collaboration with each other, will continue to meet the challenge that has been laid down.

Contact details, research project and node descriptions for the Phase 2 can be found on the NCRM website from July 2008 onwards. For more information please see the NCRM website http://www.ncrm.ac.uk or contact info@ncrm.ac.uk .

Spotlight on Resources

Getting More Out of Conferences
Michael Daw, University of Manchester

For researchers, conferences are a mostly ubiquitous part of academic life. Yet, despite the huge amount of resources expended in their organisation and attendance, they are largely ephemeral and often only of benefit to those who actually attend. Whilst there is a growing trend to record sessions and make them available on-line during or after the conference, this remains rare and anyway, watching whole presentations on your computer to find those hidden gems is a time-consuming activity and perhaps only of value if you know where to look.

A project known as Collaborative Research Events on the Web (CREW) aims to make the potentially vast amount of research resources generated at conferences more open to interrogation by researchers and so provide a better return on investment. CREW is software being developed at the Universities of Manchester and Bristol that not only enables the recording and publication of conference materials such as presentations, question and answer sessions, abstracts, papers, and so on, but also enables them to be discoverable through advanced search functionality.

At this year's Research Methods Festival, the What Is? sessions (short introductory guides to key methods) will be recorded and made available on-line. Whilst the recordings are taking place, the sessions will be annotated, both automatically and perhaps by members of the audience, so that those replaying them later can more easily navigate to what interests them most, such as a particular slide, question, or part of the talk. The recordings also use multiple camera angles to create more compelling and instructive viewing than the common single static 'head shot'.

Whilst CREW can be a useful addition for those organising conferences, its use creates potential problems in terms of privacy for speakers and attendees who are not accustomed to having what they said during a talk being made available, potentially for perpetuity. Not only does permission have to be sought for speakers and audience, it is also the case that the software must cope with the potential retraction of that permission at a later date. For example, whilst presenters may be happy to give permission to be recorded, if during the talk they make an inappropriate joke or let on rather more than

they wished about unpublished research, they may wish to limit the extent of their permission. CREW is aiming to support this kind of functionality to cater for this and other such complex scenarios. CREW is part of the Virtual Research Environments programme run by JISC.

For more information, please see http://www.crew-vre.net or contact Michael Daw at michael.daw@manchester.ac.uk.

Spotlight on Events

Deliberative Methods: Teenagers' Considered Opinions on Climate Change Issues
Dr Nicholas Bardsley, NCRM

Photo: MP John Denham addressing the young audience

On March 10th NCRM staged an event to explore youngsters' attitudes to climate change issues, at the Rose Bowl Stadium in Southampton, as part of ESRC's Festival of Social Science 2008. The event was organised by Nick Bardsley, senior research fellow at the Hub, with colleagues in the University of Southampton's Centre for Citizenship and Democracy. Ninety pupils from schools and colleges across Hampshire took part. Their opinions were polled by questionnaire before and after a period of deliberation which included presentations from Dr Steven Lake, a debate with a panel of experts including the county Geography inspector, a representative of Friends of the Earth and a researcher from the Tyndall Centre.

Deliberative research methods aim to elicit considered views rather than 'top of the head' opinions; in contrast to more established techniques they combine the elicitation of opinions with information and exercises which enable participants to have a view. They have been around for a while in politics but have been identified as under-used in a climate change context.

The event was opened by the Rt Hon. John Denham, secretary of state for Innovation Universities and Skills, who gave a brief outline of government climate change policy. The pupils' main task for the day was to decide on the relative responsibilities of individuals and the government for taking action to reduce the impact of mankind on the climate.

Initial analysis of the questionnaires the students completed at the end of the day has revealed that nearly 90 percent of them thought individuals should take steps to reduce climate change, over 70 per cent disagreed with the view that action should be the preserve of the Government. Opinion did shift slightly, however, towards the view that the government has primary responsibility. In the earlier questionnaires, 40 per cent reported they were not very concerned about climate change, after the event, this reduced to 26 per cent.

The event gave youngsters the opportunity to debate responsibility for action, rather than the more usual natural science questions. It provides some evidence on how young people's opinions change with deliberation. But another purpose was to raise awareness of these issues with young people and to this end, feedback has been invited from the government on the childrens' views, and a teaching resource will be produced from filming at the event.

For more information about the ESRC Festival of Social Science 2008 please go to http://www.esrc.ac.uk/festival. For more information about the event and poll described in this article, please contact Dr Nicholas Bardsley at n.bardsley@soton.ac.uk .

MethodsNews Editorial team: David Martin and Kaisa Puustinen