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Director's Corner

Chris Skinner



Chris Skinner, Director

Around the world, funding agencies are investing in capacity building and research in methods. I am currently involved in two specific initiatives in Europe and North America.

The Quantitative Methods in the Social Sciences programme

(www.s3ri.soton.ac.uk/qmss), funded by the European Science Foundation (ESF) supports nine day workshop/seminars where junior researchers receive instruction, undertake computer-based work and participate in seminars. There is subsequent support for participants to visit each other and use what they have learnt in their research. The long-term aim is to build networks across the nineteen participating countries, including the UK, with particular emphasis on cooperation between those whose interests are primarily methodological and those who are mainly interested in applying methods in substantive research. ESF is exploring the funding of a corresponding qualitative methods programme.

The Latent Variable Models in the Social Sciences programme (www.samsi.info/200405/socsci/socsci-home), organised by the Statistical and Applied Mathematical Sciences Institute with support from the US National Science Foundation, started off with 'kickoff' tutorials and workshops in North Carolina in September, designed to stimulate the formation of working groups of researchers with common interests, which would cooperate over the following academic year. There is particular support for graduate students and post-doctoral fellows. I am leading a working group relating to survey data analysis, which has interacted via an e-mail list and teleconferences, and is meeting again at a workshop in Montreal in May, supported by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada via its National Program on Complex Data Structures. They are also supporting one of my research students to attend - that she is from Brazil further

emphasises the global nature of methods capacity building!

At the Methods Centre we aim to learn from such activities around the world and to ensure that the UK remains at the forefront of international developments in research methods.

Viewpoint

Sue Duncan, Chief Government Social Researcher, Cabinet Office



Sue Duncan, Chief Government Social Researcher

ESRC's current investment in research methods is both timely and welcome. The Government Social Research service, which I head, has a strong interest in developing tools for social policy evaluation. If it is to use research and analysis effectively to inform decision making, it depends on that research to provide high quality and reliable outputs. But creativity is as important as dependability; research cannot afford to stand still. The questions we seek to answer are increasingly complex, demanding multi-method approaches. Tools need to be adapted to address new problems in research and evaluation. Within government and in our contractor base in the wider research community, we have had to rapidly respond to demand for new sorts of information, for example, the evaluation of policy pilots. Similarly, the strong interest in customer perspective has taken us way beyond what can be delivered via relatively unsophisticated customer satisfaction surveys; we need methods which help consumers contribute to the development of often technically complex policy areas. Finally, the whole area of performance management, which is now an integral part of the way we do business in government, demands that we look for new ways to use research to support the process of setting and measuring meaningful targets. These are just some examples of the many research challenges that currently face government.

Focus on the Hub

The Hub has been up and running for a year now, and as we reflect on what we have tried to achieve; establishing the Hub, commissioning the Nodes, contracting three short-term research projects, establishing a training and capacity building programme, engaging with government, coordinating with other ESRC initiatives and developing a Centre website and training and events database, we can't help but look forward with anticipation to the next year. With further integration with the Nodes, the Centre will soon be launching its training and capacity building programme for 2005-06, holding its launch event in June 05 with guest speaker Ian Diamond, Chief Executive of ESRC and hosting its first annual summer school in July 05.

In the remainder of the 2004/05 Academic year, the Hub has organised a joint workshop with the ESRC Identities and Social Action Programme for May 2005. This one-day training workshop, is aimed at programme researchers around methods in identity research.

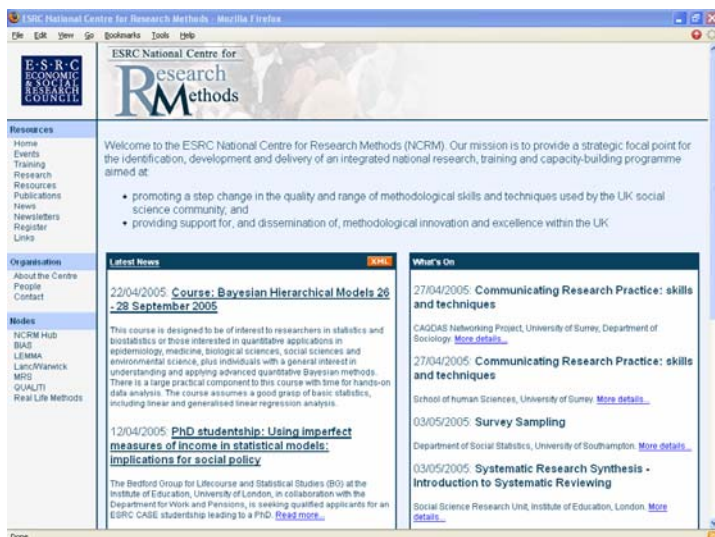
The Hub has also commissioned a two-day course in June on 'Geographically Weighted Regression', to be presented by Prof. Stewart Fotheringham, Martin Charlton and Prof. Chris Brunsdon. Details of all National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) training courses can be found in the new training events database on the NCRM website www.ncrm.ac.uk

The commissioning of the Nodes introduces a new phase in the life of the NCRM website, which has been re-launched to reflect the growing scope of the Centre. Users will find the site a continuously updated source of news and events across the whole spectrum of social science research methods including links to all NCRM's own resources. It contains NCRM publications and an archive of **MethodsNews**.

Our web strategy has been developed in close liaison with the ESRC Research Methods programme (www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/) and users can register their interest at either website to receive a single monthly email news summary. NCRM have now taken over and redeveloped the training events database previously maintained by the RM programme. The website allows simple or complex searches using keywords, the NCRM research methods typology or location. If you are an organiser of training events you are able to submit details of your courses for inclusion in the database using an online form: this is already an extensive and extremely rich database drawing information from a wide range of training providers. The database and search facilities will shortly be extended to cover other events such as research seminars and conferences.

The new web structure will allow us to provide a single entry point to all outputs and activities from the NCRM Hub and Nodes and already offers extensive information on planned

activities and sources of further information: bookmark it now!



NCRM Homepage

Focus on the Nodes

On the 1st April 05, the NCRM Nodes officially began work, each issue we will bring you news and updates from the Nodes. This issue focuses on the activities of the Methods for Research Synthesis Node (MRS).

The Methods for Research Synthesis Node is housed within the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Coordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) at the Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London. Research synthesis provides a method for identifying and bringing together the findings of primary research to answer questions posed by policy makers, practitioners, researchers, or the public. It is a relatively new methodology for the social sciences and the Node aims to increase the quantity, quality and relevance of research synthesis for informing decisions across public policy and research sectors. Work on research synthesis is sometimes limited to statistical meta-analysis for experimental studies of the effects of medical interventions. However, the logic of explicit and rigorous methods of synthesis applies to all research questions and thus all types of research methods and research evidence, with different research questions and ideological and theoretical assumptions. Methods for research synthesis cover, for example, conceptual synthesis such as meta-ethnography, and the results of these conceptual syntheses can be combined with those from a statistical meta-analysis. This is an example of using 'mixed methods' for synthesis.

The Node management team, Prof. David Gough, Dr Sandy Oliver, Ms Angela Harden and Mr James Thomas, have been developing capacity in, and methodological work on,

research synthesis at the EPPI-Centre for a number of years, and are very excited about taking this work further under the umbrella of the Methods Centre. During the first few weeks of work we have appointed three new members of research staff; planned our training events for the next year; and prepared plans for methodological work.

Our first course for 2005 - 'Systematic Research Synthesis' - runs over three days in May, and is designed to introduce participants to systematic reviews and the skills needed to conduct them. The course is designed to be multidisciplinary and includes lectures, small group tasks and individual study. This course will run again in November 2005. Both courses are London based but we plan to run the same course in Leeds in March 2006. Later on this year, we are looking forward to running three sessions at the NCRM Summer School in July which will cover a basic introduction to research synthesis; quality assessment of studies; and statistical and qualitative methods of synthesis.

For details of all MRS courses you can contact the External Liaison and Training Officer Jackie Barry j.barry@ioe.ac.uk

News from NCESS

Hazel Burke

First International Conference on e-Social Science

Registration is now open for the First International Conference on e-Social Science on 22-24 June 2005 in Manchester. The conference starts with a day of workshops. The following two days consist of paper sessions on e-social science research, tools and social shaping, and panel sessions on ethics, metadata, and funding. Keynote speakers will be:

- Prof Christine Borgman, University of California
- Prof Gary M Olson, University of Michigan
- Prof Tony Hey, Director of e-Science Core Programme, EPSRC

More details of conference sessions and the full programme are available at www.ncess.ac.uk/conference-05

Agenda Setting Workshops

These workshops aim to scope the agenda of research in e-social science. Previous workshops have looked at Quantitative Methods in e-Social Science, Video and Social Science Research and New Forms of Digital Record. Details of forthcoming workshops are available on our website at www.ncess.ac.uk/events/. The next workshop will be on the theme of Confidentiality and how new methods of joining and accessing data through the grid open new challenges in confidentiality, data security and secondary use of data. The workshop will use examples from clinical

and administrative data. Future workshop topics will include:

- Collaboration, Co-Laboratories and e-Research: Understanding and Supporting New Forms of Science and Social Science (21 June)
- GIS and the Grid
- Text Mining
- Methods and theory
- Social Simulation
- Grid-enabling data sets

You can keep up-to-date with news from the National Centre for e-Social Science by joining the email newsletter list at www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/E-SOCIAL-SCIENCE-NEWS.html.

More information about research and other activities are available at: www.ncess.ac.uk

Spotlight on Resources

Cormack Conolly

ESRC Society Today

www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk has recently been made publicly available and represents the culmination of a major project conceived over two years ago and aims to bring together the best of (predominantly UK focused) social science research under a single resource.

Freely available, the site offers a broad picture of the research available, both planned and in progress, around particular social science subjects. As well as bringing together all ESRC-funded research, it acts as a referral point to other key online resources, including:

- Social Sciences Information Gateway (SOSIG)
- Social Sciences Research Network (SSRN)
- UK Data Archive (UKDA) and the Office of National Statistics (ONS)
- ESRC Funded Research Centres and Programme websites

Users will be able to access early research findings, full texts and original data sets, track down researchers in particular fields and participate in online discussion fora. Plain English summaries of ESRC funded research will also be made available for non-academic visitors, such as business, government, the voluntary sector and the general public.

Director of Communications and Information at ESRC, Astrid Wissenburg, said: "The development of ESRC Society Today demonstrates our drive to constantly develop the way we use the online environment to maximum effect. It will be a major channel for the dissemination of a wealth of excellent and relevant social science research to a wide range of audiences.

"ESRC award holders will be able to upload their work to the site in a similar way to Regard and PHD award holders will have the option of hosting their own micro-site within the service. This means their research will remain available on the site after the work is complete."

Ian Diamond, ESRC Chief Executive, says: "... (it) will not only offer people the widest range of high quality UK social science research available in one place, but will present it in a way that makes it easy to navigate and save users valuable time."

"Many of the biggest challenges facing us in the 21st century are social science issues. This new website has the power to communicate to an unlimited audience the very real impact of social science on government, the business community and any individual living and working in the UK."

The site is currently undergoing the final stages of development with known issues being resolved, and final content updates being applied before a formal public launch and replacing the current ESRC site. Service on the existing Regard website will cease as of 30th April 2005. Award Holders should have received information about this change, but anyone requiring further details can email societytoday@esrc.ac.uk

Sociological Association, Geoff Payne, is well-known for his long-standing interest in methodological matters. In a recent article in the association's journal *Sociology* (volume 38 (1)) he and others took stock of the discipline's methodological practices and concluded that qualitative research predominated over quantitative and mixed-methods approaches, at least in the outlets for public presentation of sociological work that they considered. These included a previous annual conference of the BSA, prompting speculation at this year's conference about the extent to which things have changed in the interim. With the majority of the 400+ delegates at the conference presenting either a paper or a poster it was possible for any one delegate to attend only a minority of the presentations, but the overall impression was of a great variety of methodologies being employed within a predominantly but not exclusively qualitative ethos.

The conference theme of 'Life course: fragmentation, diversity and risk' was very open in terms of approaches and topics, and the organising team from the University of Kent were adventurous in their grouping of presentations. One session paired a presentation on shy identities with one on the Whitehall II study, and although they were based on contrasting research designs, some interesting points of comparison and common themes did emerge. The plenaries also provided food for thought about methodological innovation. Liz Stanley reported on the creative ways in which significant gaps in the information available about Olive Schreiner could be overcome in writing about her life and involvement in the social struggles of a century ago, and Jenny Hockey's discussion of life before birth and after death was equally provocative. These and other presentations prompted an optimistic assessment of how well sociologists are rising to the challenge of studying social lives with rigour and imagination.

Spotlight on Events

*Graham Crow, Associate Member of NCRM
University of Southampton*

The British Sociological Association annual conference, 21-23 March 2005, University of York

One indicator of the high profile that research methods currently have in British Sociology is that the newly-elected President of the British



MethodsNews is published quarterly by the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods School of Social Sciences University of Southampton Southampton SO17 1BJ

Telephone: +44 (0)23 8059 4539
Fax: +44 (0)23 8059 8908
Email: info@ncrm.ac.uk
Web: <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk>

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