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Director's Corner

Chris Skinner



Chris Skinner, Director

One of the Centre's key aims is to strengthen methodological *capacity* in the UK social science community. We are addressing this in part by running a wide range of workshops and short courses, enabling researchers to learn more about different methods.

Our programme of such events has been steadily growing and will reach full swing this academic year - for more information, see the training and events databases on our website at www.ncrm.ac.uk.

Some of these events may be undertaken as *training* in how to use different methods and techniques, either deepening and updating existing expertise or enabling new skills to be acquired. Other events may serve more as means of identifying opportunities and new developments, or of learning about debates around the merits of alternative methodological approaches.

We are also developing a variety of other ways to help provide methods support, including: opportunities for one-to-one engagement with researchers with methods expertise; online resources and virtual learning environments; cooperation with training providers in specific subject areas; and support for teachers of research methods.

We are keen to learn what you think about how we can best provide support. In addition to having run a series of surveys recently about training needs, we are mounting more 'roadshow' events around the UK this year (again see our events database) where we are seeking your ideas on what would be most helpful.

Viewpoint

Ray Lee, Coordinator, ESRC Researcher Development Initiative



Ray Lee, Coordinator

Early 2006 will see the initial roll-out of projects funded under Round 1 of the ESRC's Researcher Development Initiative. It is worth pondering the title of the initiative for just a moment, since it is often rendered mistakenly as the 'Research Development Initiative.' As the word

'Researcher' underlines, RDI is a training initiative, part of the Training and Development Board's on-going efforts to develop a training infrastructure in the social sciences at national and regional level.

In all, 15 projects were funded in Round 1. They encompass a mixture of online and face-to-face provision, training activities of differing lengths and degrees of intensity, and events available at regional or national level. A number of RDI projects will focus on quantitative methods including training and resources on topics such as microdata methods and practice, handling multilevel data with missing observations, longitudinal data analysis, cohort studies, linking macro and micro data, and geo-referencing. Projects are also underway to provide training on engagement with the policy process, conducting trials in social interventions, project management for researchers, the implications of recent developments in digital media, and computer analysis of qualitative data. There is support for the enhancement of training in management research and in finance, and the long-running Essex Summer School receives bursaries for training. A second round of RDI funding is due to be announced early in 2006.

RDI dovetails closely with that of other ESRC resources and activities, including NMCRCM, the National Centre for Social Research and the Research Methods Programme. NCRM's current study of training needs and provision, and the training and events databases maintained on the NCRM website are both particularly valuable in assisting RDI to achieve its mission.

As Coordinator, I am excited about the activities being developed under RDI. In particular, I welcome the opportunity to work with leading specialists around the country to deliver advanced training. Now, one meaning of 'advanced' is simply 'beyond basic.' Certainly, RDI will allow those it reaches to move beyond the current standard skill set in their particular area. Equally significant to me are the opportunities it will provide for researchers to think about and work with data in novel and innovative ways, perhaps by dealing with complexities of time, space or level, or the challenges presented by new media and forms of representation. In this context, RDI can also be seen as facilitating the movement of methods and techniques from the 'frontier' to the 'core', to use Stephen Cole's distinction, transferring them, in other words, from the cutting edge of methodological development to deployment in routine research contexts. A further way to think about 'advanced' training is to see it as being about the inculcation of 'sophistication.' The term is not used here to invoke the brittle chatter of the 1920s cocktail party. Rather, I have in mind the kind of sensibility, often embedded in tacit knowledge, heuristics and the like, very experienced researchers bring to research situations. In a number of areas RDI will seek to develop sophisticated understandings relating, for example, to the application of research to policy, and the management of the research process itself.

What is also exciting about RDI is that it will incorporate a variety of different forms of delivery; workshops, short courses, residential schools, seminars, master classes, and so on. Some projects will also develop online resources. Such development presents a number of challenges. However, I feel confident that the Researcher Development Initiative will leave behind it a legacy of considerable value.

Focus on the Hub

The Hub will be running a series of one and two day workshops in the academic year 2005/06. These include workshops on Discourse Analysis, Bayesian Inference in Surveys, Mixed Methods and Online Research Methods. Further details can be obtained from the training database on the Centre website at www.ncrm.ac.uk.

The Hub has also been collaborating with the Government Social Research Unit to coordinate a new seminar series on current and new trends in policy analysis and evaluation. This series aims to inform government and academic social researchers of new methodological developments relevant to the analysis and evaluation of government policies and programmes. The series also includes seminars on the promotion of evidenced based policy and practice. The next seminar will be on 'Recent developments in evidence informed policy and practice', presented by David Gough (Institute of Education), to be held on the 17th November 2005. For details of how to book a place or for the

complete programme of seminars, see the Events page on the Centre website at www.ncrm.ac.uk.

Over the last month the Hub has also undergone some personnel changes, Senior Research Fellow Dr Gabriele B. Durrant has now taken up a new post as Lecturer in the Centre for Applied Social Surveys (CASS).

Focus on the Nodes

19 September 2005 saw the launch at the University of Bristol of the Lemma Node of the NCRM. Lemma stands for *Learning Environment for Multilevel Modelling and Applications* and represents a coming together of quantitative researchers already at Bristol and the move of the Centre for Multilevel Modelling from London. The Node is directed by Kelvyn Jones, Sally Thomas, Jon Rasbash and Fiona Steele. Multilevel models allow the analysis of data with complex structure that mirrors social reality. Thus we can have repeated measurements of children through time and we could be interested in the effects of individual, household, neighbourhood and school characteristics on development. As households can re-form over time, and children can relocate and change schools, the resultant structure is a highly complex one with children nested in many contexts.

The project has three inter-related elements: statistical methodology, flagship substantive research projects and materials aimed at training and capacity building. The methodological goal is the estimation of multilevel models which represent a further step-change in the capacity of these models to handle realistic complexity; in particular developments will be made in the analysis of non-hierarchical structures, complex dependencies between structures and latent-class models; all these developments being implemented in appropriate software.

A variety of integrated flagship projects are planned to apply this methodology to important social science questions, including the geography of school effects; modelling the duration of hospital episodes; voting choice; mental health and psychosocial development; and modelling group diversity.

The training and capacity program will form a large parts of the Node's activities. The planned training materials will be designed to give users the necessary skill to carry out quantitative research on data with complex structure. They will be *carefully graded* allowing users to progress and develop through basic, intermediate and advanced levels; *model-based* so that even entry-level material will be shown to correspond to an underlying statistical model; *realistic* in being motivated by substantive research questions on real data sets; *authentic* and thereby support users to apply these techniques to their own data to address their own

research questions; *contextualised* so as to provide users with more than technical knowledge.

The Node will be running face-to-face training workshops combined with an ambitious web-based learning environment. Our experience is that users require considerable follow-up support if methodological insights and practical skills gained at a workshop are to be applied routinely. This is aim of web-based provision, consisting of a range of online resources, including a repository of training materials, a series of collaborative and moderated online workshops, as well as research networks which together form a virtual learning environment designed to initiate, develop, and support dispersed researchers. Following the launch some thirty participants attended a three-day, face-to-face workshop which is being supported by six weeks of online learning delivered by the Lemma team. Further details are available on the Lemma page on the Centre website at www.ncrm.ac.uk.

Other News

Louise Corti, Scheme Coordinator, UK Data Archive

QUADS: Extending the reach and impact of qualitative data

QUADS is the ESRC Qualitative Archiving and Data Sharing Scheme, running from April 2005 until October 2006. The aim of the scheme is to develop and promote innovative methodological approaches to the archiving, sharing, re-use and secondary analysis of qualitative research and data.

A range of new models will be explored for increasing access to qualitative data resources, and extending the reach and impact of qualitative studies. The scheme also aims to disseminate good practice in qualitative data sharing and research archiving. This is part of ESRC's initiative to increase the UK resource of highly skilled researchers, and to fully exploit the distinctive potential offered by qualitative research and data. Five small exploratory projects have been funded together with a Co-ordination Role:

- Representing Context in a Research Archive of Educational Evaluation Studies - P. Carmichael, M. James, J. Elliot and D. Bridges (Cambridge & UEA)
- Smart Qualitative Data: Methods and Community Tools for Data Mark-Up (SQUAD) - L. Corti and C. Grover (Essex & Edinburgh)
- Negotiating the Long View: Archiving, Representing and Sharing a Qualitative Longitudinal Resource - S. Henderson, J. Holland and R. Thomson (South Bank)
- Methodological issues in qualitative data sharing and archiving - A. Coffey, B. Dicks and M. Williams (Cardiff)
- Collating and Preserving Primary Material on the Northern Ireland Conflict - R. Miller and M. Melaugh (Queen's & Ulster)
- QUADS Coordination - L. Corti (Essex)

The QUADS Coordinator has established an Advisory Committee, been liaising with the five QUADS projects, built a web site, and produced some initial publicity. On 15 November a one day workshop is being held in London on Online Qualitative Data Resources: *Best Practice in Metadata Creation and Web Standards*. This day will discuss key standards in presenting qualitative data resources on the web and for longer-term sharing and archiving.

For more details about QUADS see: <http://quads.esds.ac.uk/> or contact Louise Corti, UK Data Archive, University of Essex, quads@esds.ac.uk

Spotlight on Resources

David Martin, Programme Coordinator, ESRC/JISC 2001 Census of Population Programme

ESRC/JISC 2001 Census of Population Programme

The census provides an enormously rich resource for the analysis of population, providing data for small areas, interaction flows, microdata samples and longitudinal data. The Census Programme (<http://census.ac.uk/>) provides data and research support services for the 1971, 1981, 1991 and 2001 UK censuses, through six specialist units:

- The [Census Dissemination Unit](#) at the University of Manchester hosts the Casweb interface to aggregate census data and Convert which allows linkage of different areal units through national postcode lookup tables.
- The [UKBORDERS](#) service at the University of Edinburgh, maintains digital boundary datasets for mapping and GIS and provides postcode directories from 1980-present.
- The [Census Interaction Data Service](#) at the Universities of Leeds and St Andrews supports analysis of 1981-2001 migration and travel to work statistics through the WICID interface and is developing innovative methods for the linkage of interaction statistics through time.
- The [Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research](#) at the University of Manchester supports the delivery and analysis of the 1991 and 2001 Samples of Anonymised Records, which were commissioned by the programme.
- The [Centre for Longitudinal Study Information and User Support](#) at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine supports users of the ONS Longitudinal Study, working within an ONS secure data setting.
- An Athens-based one-stop registration service for all the online datasets is provided by the [Census Registration Unit](#) at the UK Data Archive, University of Essex.

In addition, the programme is responsible for data specification, acquisition and licensing of census and related datasets from the UK census agencies and other suppliers on behalf of the academic community. ESRC are currently commissioning a follow-on programme to meet user needs from 2006 to 2011, to include consultation and specification of academic requirements for 2011, and an innovations

strand aiming to deliver methodological development in the run-up to the 2011 censuses.

opportunity for fifteen projects from the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme, a major investment into educational research across the lifecourse, to share their findings with delegates. Furthermore, the use (and misuse) of educational research by policy-makers was also considered by the incoming President of BERA, Geoff Whitty.

Spotlight on Events

Chris Taylor, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University

The British Educational Research Association (BERA) annual conference, 14 - 17 September 2005, University of Glamorgan, Pontypridd

More than 1,000 delegates from all over the world attended the 31st annual British Educational Research Association annual conference at the University of Glamorgan, Pontypridd. The 900 papers presented over three days clearly demonstrated the scale and diversity of educational research in the UK, and stressed the significance of educational research within the social sciences more generally. Topics ranged from truancy to tomboy identities and from racism to dyslexia. A particularly strong feature of this year's conference was the breadth of research focussing upon the higher education sector in the UK.

The importance and impact of educational research was also demonstrated by the presence of Jane Davidson, the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning for the National Assembly for Wales, to open the conference. In her speech Jane Davidson pointed to the many research studies that have directly informed educational policy-making in Wales, including the abolition of SATs for 11 and 14 year olds, the end of official examination performance league tables and the introduction of deferred tuition fees in higher education. This was followed by the launch of a new BERA Special Interest Group – 'Educational Research and Education Policy-making'. The conference also provided the

All of these conference 'highlights' would seem to mark an important departure from 2001 when David Hargreaves, former Chief Executive of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) speaking at that annual conference, said of educational researchers, "The impression given is of a community that is not at ease with itself, nor with its partners, such as the teaching profession and the government". However, in the same speech he also stated "there are some able young researchers in education, but too few". The same concern was dramatically illustrated at this year's conference by Ian Diamond, Chief Executive of the ESRC, whose plenary speech reminded delegates of some of the most important challenges facing education research, and in particular, the impact of a large proportion of education researchers expecting to retire in the next five to ten years. This will have significant consequences on the community's capacity to undertake high quality research in the next few decades.

It is more important than ever, then, that the education research community and BERA support the development of another generation of educational researchers. So it was magnificent to see over 80 new and/or student researchers present their own research in the more informal setting of the student conference prior to the opening of the main conference. The NCRM was also able to exhibit and publicise its work during the conference, and we hope that next year the NCRM will play an even greater role in enhancing the research expertise of this next generation of educational researchers.



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>

ESRC National Centre for



The Methods News Editorial team is: Becky Clarke, Gráinne Conole and Dave Martin

www.ncrm.ac.uk