Recognizing Social Work

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Summary

There has been little interest until recently in the question of whether social work has the characteristics of an academic discipline. This article offers a synopsis of issues arising from a review of social work and social care research funded through the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE). Following a brief scene setting, the first main section of the article gives a synopsis of the social work and social care community’s experience and judgements regarding their engagement with the research council. In the second part of the article, we review relevant policies, structures and trends from an ESRC and social science perspective. We focus on the development of research programmes, followed by an outline of the delivery and implementation of programmes. In the final section, we review the issues, themes and directions that emerged from the project. These include judgements of research relevance, research users, research utilization, the social work contribution to the development of research methods, inter-disciplinary research, the question of whether there are distinctive attributes of social work research, research capacity, career building, priority setting, and the outcomes of social work funding bids. We also reflect on the development and delivery of research programmes, and the implications of the invisibility of social work research within the ESRC. Disciplines within universities are not fixed and abiding realities. ‘Recognising’ social work is a dynamic, socially negotiated process, shaped by the construction and ordering of knowledge claims within social work and social science communities, and reflecting power differentials that are mediated through structural mechanisms that tend...
to exclude new ‘claimants’ such as social work. We include a number of recommendations, and suggest ways in which the issues may have relevance beyond the UK.

Keywords: social science, ESRC, social work, research, discipline.

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is the largest single UK funder of social science research, with an annual budget in excess of £80 million. Its role has been significantly expanded in recent years with a view to reinforcing the contribution made by social science to evidence-based policy and practice. The central, if by no means only, ESRC managed mechanism for achieving this is a stream of successive research programme budgets (http://www.esrc.ac.uk). What, if any, contribution is made through these major research programmes to the UK knowledge base for social work and social care? The question is central to issues of research capacity in social work, research assessment activities, the contribution of social work to the university, and postgraduate research skills within the social work community.

Social work and social care research have had a low profile and visibility within the ESRC. The reasons for this are probably multiple and not easy to elicit. In addition, there are doubtless mixed views within the social work community as to whether engagement with ESRC research opportunities is to the benefit of social work. Such doubts probably include uncertainty as to whether the ESRC is likely to accept the importance of applied and practice-based research. The larger part of British social work research is probably funded through central government departments in England and through devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Charitable organizations, local government departments and social work agencies fund a multiplicity of small and medium-sized research and evaluation initiatives. All of these are likely to prioritize the short or medium-term usefulness of funded disciplined inquiry.

This article is based on a review of the actual and potential coverage of social work and social care research within ESRC programmes, commissioned in 2003 by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) (see Shaw et al., 2004 for the full report). The structures and to some extent the day-to-day workings of ESRC are described on the main website at www.ESRC.ac.uk. The context for this paper is British—the acronyms especially so. We have not developed a case for generalizing from the UK to other countries, although we do suspect that the sharp edge of the social work/social science interface is a source of almost routine discomfort at least in the West. We do not, of course, believe that the form of the issues will be precisely the same from one country to another. For example, social work’s relationship to the discipline of social policy within the UK is different from the corresponding relationship in the USA.

Inquiry methods

The review was tasked to assess the actual and potential coverage of social work and social care research within ESRC programmes, and suggest the implications of this
for social work and social care research in the UK. The review included a variety of straightforward data collection activities. Initial desk research of a range of ESRC documentation downloaded from the ESRC website helped to identify those research programmes with a more obvious social work relevance. An open consultation exercise was carried out via a number of different websites and distribution lists likely to be used by social work and social care academics and researchers. These included the lists of the Joint Universities Council Social Work Education Committee (JUC SWEC), the Social Work and Policy Learning and Teaching Support Network (SWAP LTSN), and SCIE’s own site. The consultation aimed to discover the experience and views of the social work and social care community regarding ESRC’s role relating to the generation of social work and social care knowledge. We found the use of the composite phrase ‘social work and social care’ difficult from time to time. If there is uncertainty about the scope of ‘social work’ within the ESRC, ‘social care’ is even less familiar or understood among ESRC officers and non-social work researchers. We have retained the varied usage in this article.

The topics give a flavour of the review’s focus. Participants were invited to comment on the contribution to social work/social care knowledge made by ESRC programme research. This could include comments on national priorities, larger-scale programmes, inter-disciplinarity, cumulative knowledge building, systematic reviews, and R&D approaches to intervention research and model building. Views were also invited on methodological questions, such as the development of instruments and innovative methods for evaluative research, and the methodological advancement of user involvement in research and development, as well as broader concerns regarding knowledge utilization and research capacity building.

Contributors were asked to consider, where appropriate, the potential contribution of ESRC research programmes to workforce issues, the strengths and limitations of the social work and social care community’s engagement with ESRC programmes, and social work’s voice in the development of ESRC priorities. They were invited to suggest specific changes they would like to see in the development, management and outcomes of ESRC programmes.

An e-mail questionnaire was sent to all principal investigators for projects funded under two research programmes: ‘Growing Older: Extending Quality of Life’ and ‘Research Methods Phase 1’. Twenty-four projects were funded under the Growing Older programme, which ended in April 2003. The Research Methods programme, with twenty-nine projects, was on-going at the time of the review. The questionnaire contained eleven questions, and was primarily aimed at finding out about researchers’ experiences of being funded by the ESRC, and their perceptions of the actual and potential coverage of social work and social care within individual projects and the two research programmes as a whole. The Growing Older and Research Methods research programmes were selected as case studies for the present review because a preliminary assessment of all ESRC programmes suggested that projects funded under Growing Older and Research Methods were more likely to involve social work and social care academics who had successfully bid for ESRC grants, as well as individuals who were working on potentially relevant projects but who might not have any social work or social care ‘identity’. 

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A consultation workshop was attended by eight researchers, most of whom had experience of being ESRC grant holders. They collectively reviewed their responses to emerging findings from this project, as well as their views about particular subject areas: research investment; methods and instruments for outcome studies; knowledge utilisation; human resource management; and user involvement in research and development. Finally, we were given access to anonymised data on bids to ESRC, and completed face-to-face interviews with two senior ESRC staff. Data collection took place between October and November 2003. Analysis took place contemporaneously with the data collection. The analytic themes emerged in the early stages inductively from the intentionally open-ended desk research, electronic consultation with the social work and social care community, and the studies of the two research programmes (emergent themes were recorded using Microsoft Excel). The Workshop stage and the interviews with ESRC staff were framed around the specific aspects of the project brief and the themes that had begun to firm up from the early analysis.

The following section of the article gives a synopsis of the social work and social care community’s experience and judgements regarding their engagement with the research council. This sets the context for the second part of the paper in which we review relevant policies, structures and trends from an Economic and Social Research Council and social science perspective. We focus on the development of research programmes, followed by an outline of the delivery and implementation of programmes. The final section reviews the issues, themes and directions that emerged from the project, and makes a number of recommendations.

**The view from the social work community**

There was a consensus from the electronic consultation and the open workshop that social work bidders to the research council may face challenges arising from the nature of social work research:

I suspect that much social work type research is not very attractive to the ESRC because of their focus on theory and methodology and a tendency to be averse to practice-oriented research which does not overtly address theoretical issues (ESRC centre director).

Successful social work linked bids may require tactics that ‘hide’ or at least subordinate the social work stance. This was expressed most clearly by one recent ESRC grant holder:

Historically we have needed to fly under flags of theoretical convenience other than purely social work in order to win approval …. (C)hoosing the right partners and sounding the right tones about conceptual advances has been critical (former ESRC grant holder).

Respondents were not, however, of the view that ESRC research had no relevance to social work. Some suggested areas where they thought ESRC
programmes may have direct relevance, e.g. evidence-based policy and practice (partly because it provides scope acceptable to ESRC for ensuring practice developments have theoretical criteria), poverty-linked programmes, and programmes inviting research on family dynamics. Nonetheless, there was a recurring theme that a search for direct relevance in ESRC programmes may not be the obvious way of engaging. As one person remarked, 'Mostly I suspect the link is indirect'. For another person, this was as it should be. S/he was:

... quite happy that social work research is subsumed under social policy ... psychology ... sociology ...

A similar caution about ‘relevance’ arguments emerged from the workshop. If, as we consider subsequently, specifications for large-scale council programmes are developed largely in the absence of a social work input, this may result in specifications that, by their nature, require more demanding work by social work/care research bidders in order to elicit the relevance of the specification to their research interests.

Having said this, the tenor of the observations made to us was that the social work community should be circumspect in the way it makes a case for ‘relevant’ programme research. For example, the argument should not be focussed on programmes that are directly relevant to social work. Within the culture of a general social science research council programmes are not developed with specific disciplines in mind. Specific relevances emerge, for example, during the development phase. We recommend later that the ESRC needs to ensure there are standing arrangements to consult the social work community during that process. But the view was also conveyed to us that social work educators should not rely on pleas for social work as a special case, but must become skilled at bid-making.

Those who spoke to us would not, we think, use this argument to support what might be called a social work research deficit model. For example, on methodology, the tone of replies was that social work and social care research has the potential to develop and enhance research strategies and methodology in areas where ESRC research already has modest or potential value. We heard little to support the stronger position that social work should be promoting novel research methods. The two areas that attracted most comment in the electronic consultation were inter-disciplinarity and research rigour. First, comments on inter-disciplinarity focused more on ‘discipline’ as roughly equivalent to ‘profession’ rather than as a social science discipline. For example, social work researchers are, it was suggested, well ‘set up’ to investigate multi-disciplinary teams, knowledge transfer, and how multi-disciplinary professional teams actually work (as a route to addressing workforce issues). Second, social work engagement with ESRC programme research provides an opportunity to add a needed dimension of theory and rigour to areas where social work/care research is vigorous (e.g. action research; user-led research; practitioner research). Workshop members gave a slightly different emphasis. When commenting on research methods that social work and social care researchers distinctively, though not exclusively, emphasize, examples suggested were:

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Systematic knowledge reviews.
User research and the democratizing of research more generally.
Applications of qualitative research to service/intervention outcomes.

Various points were made in the workshop regarding the second of these points:

1. It is expensive and hard to do.
2. There are sometimes distinctive research ethics questions.
3. Social work bids need to take into account that the council will be concerned with the research rigour of user-led research.
4. It raises linked questions of research capacity.

There was some consideration in this context as to whether the ESRC holds an unhelpfully restricted notion of 'research users' as limited to professional, political and policy interests. The argument regarding 'users' extends to the role of the research council in promoting the utilisation of research. A view was expressed on a number of occasions that the ESRC's basic assumptions about the usability of knowledge are unduly restricted.

There was some support on each side of the social work/social science fence for acknowledging distinctive aspects of social work research as against most social science disciplines. As one senior social scientist expressed it, 'There's something distinct about social work from other disciplines ... that we need to nurture'. Such nurturing may have been in people's minds when they identified areas for change or development on the part of the ESRC. A composite listing of the main proposals would include pleas that ESRC should:

- Increase the provision of collaborative studentships part funded by social work and social care organizations.
- Develop a 'Teaching company' type scheme in independent/public sectors.
- Develop exchange schemes.
- Include more social care researchers on panels.
- Make resources available for research dissemination.
- Make meetings with end users normative.
- Promote more cross-programme project meetings and linkage between programmes.
- Adopt a less 'elevated' concept of 'research user'.
- Undertake proactive education to promote social work bids.

The acceptance of such strategies would make the research council more 'relevant' to social work, but there was broad agreement that ESRC might not be the forum for the full range of social work research. For example, outcome research is rarely present in bids to the council. This point was supported by the
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database of research and seminar competition bids provided to us by the ESRC. In contrast to funders of more explicitly 'applied' research, the ESRC, so it was argued, ought to be more specifically interested in conceptual issues around outcomes. Those we consulted supported a general stance that the social work community should look to ESRC funding for analytical and explanatory research about social work and social care. As someone expressed it, 'We don’t need to know more about the what; we need to know the how and why’. For example, there is need for empirical work on how research is, in fact, used, so that research utilization is treated as involving more than model building of best practice.

Research Council views: developing and delivering research programmes

In the following section of the paper, we try to view the world through the eyes of the research council—its management and information systems, public domain information, and the views of key senior ESRC staff. The tone of this section is a mix of problem analysis and prescriptive standpoints.

Developing research programmes

ESRC staff openly accepted the significance of social work’s invisibility within the council due to its general lack of recognition within management and information categories. It was acknowledged that the council has not been able to say ‘this is our portfolio of social work research’ because information hitherto had not been collected in that way.

In consequence, the social work picture remained obscured, and the research council perf orelied on proxy measures (e.g. numbers of research bids that name social policy as the primary discipline). ESRC staff readily acknowledged that this created an acute anomaly. Hitherto, the ESRC response to the social work community in the UK had been entirely reactive. While the ESRC response to a pro-active line from within the social work community had been tolerant—'we have built a bridge', as one person said to us—it was agreed that the initiative had come from social work and not from the council.

An underlying problem in much of this is how disciplines come to be recognized and accepted within the academic community. We sensed that in some key regards, disciplines, once they become formally recognized, have a taken for granted status. Thus, when social work observers might ask how sympathetic ESRC is towards funding social work in comparison with other disciplines, a key stance is captured in the realization that the ESRC does not prioritize and systemize its work around disciplines in a way which says ‘this year we are going to focus in and concentrate more research on sociology' or
'we want to do more in politics and international relations'. This makes it difficult for ESRC staff to frame an answer to such a query because it contains a premise that they do not share. It is from this standpoint that the social work community and others ought to read the frequent assertions made to us that the research council is ‘absolutely blind’ on the fortunes of one discipline against another, and ‘We don’t segment our audiences in that way’.

This is not a question special to social work. We sensed that the ESRC has ‘rehearsed’ this debate with other small discipline groups as well. However, the position of ESRC is not carefully nuanced at this point. On the one hand, it is believed within the council that allegations that this or that discipline loses out in the funding decision-making process are, as one insider poignantly expressed it, ‘a triumph of perception over reality’. Yet it is also accepted that the non-recognized disciplines do not ‘count’ within the ESRC system and hence evidence is always inferred from stand-in, surrogate data.

Two wider considerations are relevant at this point. First, there is probably an unresolved question of whether social work is or wishes to be seen as a social science discipline in quite the same way as, for example, geography or sociology. This is probably as much unresolved within the social work community as within the ESRC. We have already quoted the unelaborated view of one non-social work senior academic that ‘There’s something distinct about social work from other disciplines’. This claim was often made to us through the project, and from various ‘sides’. For example, social work may be seen as ‘quite different from some disciplines which are more bounded .... They have a more defined boundary’. On this view of things, the strategies for discipline development may be less complex in disciplines where ‘the tool kit ... is clearer’. This perhaps creates an underlying ambiguity within the ESRC as to whether they are the obvious target for all social work bids.

Second, it was clear to us that ESRC awareness of what counts as social work or social care is fairly slight. The social work voice is not widely heard within the ESRC. As a consequence, ESRC staff are likely to draw their main understanding of social work from their personal experience. If the voice of the social work community is not heard, then ESRC staff, even when well intentioned, have an endemic sense of information deficiency, which makes it difficult for them to ‘read’ the social work agenda. For example, the ESRC has a substantial database regarding bids and outcomes (see below), but is unlikely to know with confidence how much of this would be thought ‘mainstream’ social work as seen and defined within the social work community. The ESRC (and perhaps social science colleagues) has the potentially intractable problem of taking a reading on something that, in a real sense, does not exist. This doubtless helps to explain the repeated requests made to us by ESRC staff that the social work community should develop a shared sense of research priorities and communicate those to the ESRC.

There has been a growing discussion of these issues within the UK social work community. The ‘Theorising Social Work Research’ seminar series funded by the ESRC was followed by a number of papers published in the first
half of this decade in journals (in particular, a Special Issue of *The British Journal of Social Work* (30(4) 2000)) and in book form (e.g. Lovelock et al., 2004). An informally accepted code of social work research ethics was developed (Butler, 2002). More open reflection has taken place on research priorities within social work (e.g. Shaw, 2003) and on the performance of social work in the UK government’s quinquennial Research Assessment Exercise (Fisher, 1999; Fisher and Marsh, 2003). Doctoral volume and capacity has also come under growing focus (e.g. Lyons, 2002; Orme, 2003).

**Delivering research programmes**

It is not easy to identify and enumerate social work or social care ‘success’ in engaging with ESRC research opportunities. Disciplines that are not recognized are only semi-visible. Even if they can be counted by using proxy indicators, the level of activity will still be partly hidden. We have noted already the tactical alliances (‘flags of theoretical convenience’) used by some social work academics when applying to the ESRC.

We tried to surface some of the evidence in two ways. First, accepting for the moment the internal ESRC working assumption that almost all social work bids were included under a Social Policy label, we checked the public domain ESRC Annual Reports for summaries of social policy bids. In reality, we think this is very unlikely to exhaust social work-linked bids. Sociology, psychology, economics, and other disciplines have all been used, in our own experience, as congenial covers for a social work-driven bid.

The relevant table in the ESRC Annual Report 2002–03 (ESRC, 2003, p. 75) indicated for sixteen different disciplines the number of research projects funded by the council in 2002–03. There were three ‘Social Policy’ projects out of a total of 109 projects (2.75 per cent). The equivalent table in the ESRC Annual Report for 2001–02 (ESRC, 2002, p. 49) showed that two projects were funded out of thirty-four (5.9 per cent) in the subject area of social policy. The equivalent table in the ESRC Annual Report for 2000–01 (ESRC, 2001, p. 39) disclosed that four projects were commissioned out of seventy-six (5.3 per cent) in the subject area of social policy.

These figures confirm the interpretive difficulty associated with the lack of a social work/social care category in ESRC management and information systems, and the limitations of using ‘social policy’ as a social work proxy indicator. We made efforts to obtain more specific data. Following discussions with their data protection staff, ESRC released to us anonymised information for different categories of bids in the three years up to October 2003, including titles and outcomes. The volume of business is high. Research grant bids averaged over 600 per year. The bid titles were analysed according to whether they appeared to be focused in the minds of the applicants, in part or whole on social work or welfare policy. Applicants’ own categorisations were not available and we deliberately used the narrower, social care-linked category
of ‘welfare’ policy. Hence, the percentages are smaller than the 2.75–5.9 per cent given earlier in the report for Social Policy bids. We were not making a judgement as to whether the bids would have potential relevance to social work in the mind of any possible user of the research. We have also identified those where the applicants possibly intended such relevancies. The analysis is approximate, probably marked by some under and over counting. However, we consider the data robust enough to bear the rather general conclusions sought in this report. We analysed this information in an effort to shed light on three questions, which were also raised in the ESRC staff interviews:

1. How well represented are social work/social care bids within the wider ESRC ‘pool’?
2. Do social work bids result in a similar range of outcomes as other bids?
3. Is there any evidence to support the concern sometimes expressed that social work bids rated as of a high standard by the ESRC are less likely to receive funding than highly rated bids from other social science disciplines? The point at issue here is whether a proportion of social work bids may be rated as high as non-social work bids, but at the final committee decision taking stage lose out through some structural discrimination mechanism.

Of the 2538 bids listed in the data supplied by the ESRC, fifteen (0.6 per cent) appeared to include a link to social work, most commonly to services for children and families. Thirty-two (1.3 per cent) had an obvious welfare policy link, and a further twenty-two (0.9 per cent) had a possible social work link. The results are summarized in Table 1. The rating system referred to here consists of a two-stage process of ratings by expert referees followed by a committee decision. The ratings range from A1 (‘Applications of outstanding scientific merit, ie of such novelty or timeliness as likely to make an outstanding scientific contribution’) to A5 (‘Applications which offer some value in the potential scientific contribution of the proposal, but which may not be of consistent high quality’) plus either Beta or reject.

Our tentative conclusions from this table are:

1. Bids that are identifiably associated with social work and social care are almost certainly small in number. Bids are not categorized in the ESRC list

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according to the primary disciplines, so it is not possible to be entirely certain, but the conclusion is a safe if not precise one.

2 The small numbers make it difficult to compare social work bid outcomes with others. However, success rates seem comparable with those for the whole sample.

3 The number of identifiable successful social work bids is very small.

4 In regard to the possibility that social work ‘A’-rated bids are less likely to be funded than other similarly rated bids, taking the cluster of social work, social care and welfare policy as a group, the rate of non-funded ‘A’-rated bids is almost identical to that for the whole sample.

An important insight on this last point was provided in our interviews with ESRC staff. We asked if they thought there was any evidence to support the suggestion that Alpha-rated social work bids were less likely to get funded than Alpha-rated bids from the mainstream social sciences. The response was unequivocal:

We’re completely blind on that .... It’s almost never the case that you end up with bids that are absolutely of equal quality ... if we really are down to two applications and there’s only the money to fund one then that’s going to be a judgement but ... the judgement will be based as best the panel can be on the science.

The process was explained as follows:

The system starts [with] an A1 grade and works down to an A6 grade. It’s differentiated within the alphabet and sometimes the board doesn’t get much [beyond] A3 ... scores and some very, very good [alpha] proposals ... don’t end up getting funded.

The data limitations and the associated interview glosses suggest that the figures in Table 1 should be treated with caution. However, the primary implication of this data may support the views of the ESRC staff, that the apparently low levels of ESRC funded social work research is explainable more in terms of the level of activity of the social work community than in terms of ESRC decision making. However, we should not conclude from this, that the resolution—or even the causes—of this shortfall lie solely with the social work community.

Case study programmes

Given the importance of this issue, we also looked at social work and social care in programme delivery by starting from a different point—the presence or absence of social work and social care themes within projects linked to the two case study research programmes. What follows is based on responses to the e-mail questionnaire to principal applicants funded under the two case study research programmes, Growing Older and Research Methods Phase 1.
Several of our programme consultation questions invited comments on how programme research might or in fact did contribute to social work or social care knowledge.

**Knowledge for understanding**

Only three respondents made any direct comment on the contribution of their research to the evidence base for social work or social care. Two of these were cautious and avoided specific and positive suggestions regarding the relevance of their project. Respondents, especially those working on Growing Older projects, put forward ways in which they believed the research programme as a whole could contribute to social work and social care knowledge. The following comments illustrate the range and emphases of the replies we received:

... more multi-disciplinary .... However ... I suspect the findings are not practice based enough to have specific relevance to the social work literature.

By emphasizing cultural diversity ... by not over-pathologizing later life, by giving older people a voice, by pointing up new areas for research eg widowed.

By highlighting the growing diversity of the experience of old age ..., by drawing attention to the multiple risks faced by some older people ....

These are potentially rich areas of relevance, but they also pose a major agenda for how utilization and knowledge transfer bridges are made (cf. Walter et al., 2004).

**Knowledge for policy and practice**

Three ‘Growing Older’ respondents believed that their findings had the potential to inform national and/or local policy, although the claims were rather loosely substantiated, for example, on the basis of presentations to policy audiences.

The only response to this question from the Research Methods respondents was more a comment on the process of supporting an evidence base. They emphasized the need to influence thinking first about the way in which researchers across disciplines—including those in both social work and social care—think about the presentation of their own research findings, and secondly about the way in which readers of research reports on social work and social care interpret the texts. They suggested that insofar as national or local policy is influenced by the findings of research studies, then researchers may contribute by sharpening the focus on the way reports are written.

In a similar somewhat insubstantial way, some Growing Older respondents also believed that their work could make a contribution to knowledge at the
practitioner level through targeted dissemination in professional journals, and conference presentations aimed at practitioner audiences. 'Knowledge for policy' and 'knowledge for practice' are both passive rather than active utilization models.

**Knowledge for better methodology**

Five respondents from the Growing Older research programme felt that their project had extended the knowledge base for research methods in social work and social care. These further developments included:

- Building on methods used by previous researchers.
- Inviting research participants (older people) to a meeting where, once the research findings had been presented, they were given the opportunity to make verbal contributions from the floor.
- Gaining access to individuals and groups traditionally defined as 'hard to reach'.
- Adding to the knowledge base of how best to involve research subjects as partners within the research process.
- Developing a new research instrument for assessing 'environment' as an aspect of quality of life.

One Research Methods respondent predicted that their work might eventually contribute to social work and social care knowledge through the development of some form of practical application—in this instance, through improving good research writing of qualitative research. Research Methods respondents highlighted several potential methodology and research capacity gains for social work from their projects:

- Training present and future social work and social care researchers in the use of qualitative software.
- Focusing on the issue of informed consent in the research process, and thus revealing the impact of this dimension on the findings that are generated.
- Improved methods for collection of small area statistical data.
- Improved diagnostics for multilevel model specification.

**Dissemination**

Respondents were asked about the dissemination and utilisation of project findings. There was a general sense that linkages of this kind are typically seen as a function lying beyond the project (e.g. 'we don't do dissemination'). We also sensed that those who held this view do not express—or possibly even possess—views as to how this might be achieved. A distinction can be made between linkage
to social work/care at the proposal stage, and linkage to social work/care at data collection/analysis stages. Only one study respondent specified social work links at either of these stages.

**ESRC funding for social work and social policy related bids**

In addition to comments on the direct relevance of their own projects, programme grant holders were also asked more general questions about the role of the ESRC. Most respondents did not feel in a position to comment on this, and the few replies we received seemed to take mutually exclusive positions.

One respondent accused us of asking ‘a loaded question that assumes a conspiratorial agenda’, whereas others considered the ESRC system as:

relatively unsympathetic .... Applications are likely to be read by specialists...

... who misunderstand the interdisciplinary nature of much social care research.

The latter view echoes some of the comments made to us, and reported earlier in this article, by the social work community. Applications, it was suggested, were likely to be read by specialists, e.g. economists, sociologists or psychologists, who misunderstood the inter-disciplinary nature of much social care research, and who understood it through the limited lenses of their own disciplines. Two different kinds of points were made in this context. To some, the ESRC ‘seem more interested in social policy issues than in strictly social work ones’. For another respondent, ‘There’s a big hype [within the ESRC] about user involvement .... Sometimes it is felt to ring a little false’.

**Directions, conclusions and recommendations**

A preliminary project of this kind inevitably poses as many questions as answers. We try in this closing section to suggest areas of general conclusions, and likely directions, in addition to a number of general and specific recommendations.

**Recognizing social work**

Social work and social care recognition within the ESRC has two main environments: ESRC structures and disciplinary recognition. On the former, the view likely to hold sway within the council is that social work membership of council structures should follow rather than precede an increase in social work bids. However, where such a strategy prevails, the ball is always placed in the social work court. It is a conservative stratagem. It is our view that negotiations should be marked by mutuality—a social work voice in the structures of social
science funding bodies proceeding hand in hand with greater social work application activity. 'It is only a constructive dialogue with the social work discipline that can really help us to identify our priorities' is a view likely to be shared between the ESRC and the social work community.

On the second environment of disciplinary recognition, the voice of the social work and social care community needs to be heard at all levels. Historically, the social work community has deliberated with some care as to whether and in what sense it is a profession. This has frequently included defences against critical accounts of how social work is seen or thought to be seen by others. For an incisive account of the historical context of such concerns, especially in the USA, Lubove (1965) remains unsurpassed. Kirk and Reid revisit the debates of the early twentieth century (Kirk and Reid, 2002). Nokes' deliberation (1967) on the nature of the professional task in British welfare professions is also a much better starting point than some later analyses, as is Noel Timms' early tract on The Language of Social Casework (1968). Paul Wilding provided a consummate if uncomfortable assessment of how social welfare professionals exercise power (Wilding, 1982).

There has, until recently at least, been less interest in the academic analogue of whether social work is a discipline. In the UK, at the time of writing, the ESRC is in a highly anomalous position, arising from its positive move to give partial recognition of social work within the training arena. This is not exclusively a social work issue. In the context of discipline recognition, ESRC is faced with a constant lobby from numerous academic groups that, if accepted, would lead overnight to a doubling of the recognized number of disciplines. Yet, disciplines are not fixed entities. They are negotiated communities, and, as such, they are sites for claims-making.

A connecting problematic is the extent, character and shifts in the recognition of social work as a 'discipline' within the social science community. There is no controversy—at least in countries where social work education and training programmes exist—as to whether social work is a discipline in the sense of 'a branch of instruction'. But in the sense of a 'department of knowledge' (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary), social work's disciplinary identity raises numerous awkward questions. Even those unequivocally committed to the scientific character of social work have sometimes regarded the social work research community as 'scattered across many academic hamlets' (Kirk and Reid, 2002, p. 218).

Programme development

We found the comments made to us regarding programme relevance generally persuasive. The social work community should not expect the ESRC in its normal mode of operation to support or facilitate programmes that have a specific social work lead interest or relevance. The operation of ideas of relevance is not disciplinary-linked in a very specific way, as we have illustrated in various ways in our review of the ESRC stance on disciplines. It seems to us that the social work and social care research communities should engage with ESRC on those same terms. We would be interested to know if this also applies outside the UK.
This should be a twin-pronged engagement. First, there should be a proactive determination to initiate programme ideas that will resonate with the ESRC stance on programme relevance. Proposals that are perceived by the wider social science community as a plea for a social work programme of research will receive short shrift and be seen as special pleading. Taking such proposals forward will need determined and concerted effort across social work interest groups, and with a wide range of social science colleagues.

Second, there should be continued pressure on social science funding agencies to integrate social work and social care research agenda into programme development. It may not be so much social scientists’ commitment to relevance that is at issue, as the inconsistency and even narrowness with which it is applied. Our concern is that awareness of social work agenda within social science funding agencies is likely to be restricted to a small number of key staff. We would also expect there to be diverse positions within the ESRC on the merits of encouraging small disciplines—just as there is likely to be a measure of ambivalence in the social work community about sitting with social scientists. Some social workers doubtless assent to Auden’s caution that:

Thou shalt not sit

With statisticians nor commit

A social science (W. H. Auden, ‘Under Which Lyre’).

Wider diffusion will need sustained proactive work by social workers, and include pressure towards greater consistency in how principles of relevance are developed and integrated into funding cultures.

These recommendations impinge on rather wider issues that we would wish to see social science colleagues address with vigour. First, a broader concept of the research user should be developed across social science that will recognize the contribution of service user and carer stakeholder interests in all fields of research relevant to service development and delivery. Second, we believe that the research utilization process is insufficiently recognized by the majority of social scientists and funding agencies. It demands and needs resourcing more fully as a routine part of grant budgets. We would wish to see the development of a routine requirement of all applications to the ESRC, for applicants to provide evidence that active utilization strategies have been considered and appropriately taken into account in the budgets. We do not, however, believe that directly instrumental models of research utilization should be normative for social science, or, indeed, for all social work research.

Capacity building and research training

There are several areas where we would recommend continued lobbying in the interests of ‘discipline health’ within social work. For example, capacity building
resources are urgently needed for doctoral research in social work and social care (Orme, 2003). This may be best done through a mixture of fostering ‘centres of excellence’ and also a diffusion and dispersal model that promotes inclusivity. There are important arguments about critical mass, expertise, research capacity, and market forces on each side of this mix. Social science funding agencies may be tempted to leave postgraduate development to market forces. While the distribution of scarce and valued resources is clearly a sensitive issue, social science funding agencies should be proactive in countering excessive market interests. The social scientist we cited earlier as believing that there is something distinct about social work from other disciplines went on to say:

I also personally have a view that while there are some really truly world class social work researchers in this country the base is fairly fragile and that it is an area where. ...—this is a personal view—... we need to have some capacity strengthening.

There would appear to be some recognition within UK social science that the development of doctoral opportunities has to proceed hand in hand with post-doctoral openings. This may be a helpful approach for the social work community where some doctoral students may well intend to move into or remain in direct practice. At present, a substantial proportion of social work doctoral students study part-time, which makes more difficult the maintenance of a postgraduate community. We found an apparent openness within the ESRC on these issues. The line of reasoning needs ongoing development. For example, if it is accepted in the words of one of our informants that ‘this is an area where people [may] want to go into the practitioner end rather than stay as researchers in the [higher education] system’ there would be a strong case for developing strategic post-doctoral fellowships that provide social work Ph.D. achievers with a choice of career settings. More radical approaches of this kind would also be of interest to other discipline areas with professional agenda. Targeted post-doctoral fellowships could facilitate appropriate career building opportunities in social work and social care research.

The social work and social care community

The social work and social care community has the potential to offer a distinctive and valued contribution to social science research strategies. Methodology areas provide a good example of the actual and potential contribution that can be made, e.g. through developing research rigour in the context of a commitment to the democratizing of research.

A recurring theme of this article has been a plea for the social work community to understand how the ESRC 'system' works. For example, in certain key regards, we have seen how it follows rather than leads disciplinary developments. We suspect that similar considerations may apply in other countries where social science is embedded in the academic and professional culture.
The case for the benefits of engaging with research programmes was made to us as follows:

A programme ... does de-construct and re-construct communities, insofar as if a programme works well you can bring together (those) who might not necessarily work with each other .... You have a opportunity to be exposed to a broader range of theoretical approaches, practical approaches and have a ... shared set of what good practice is for engaging with the academic community and non-academic community .... If you have a really good programme with a good bunch of researchers in it, they can draw upon each others’ strengths .... The programmes are a good vehicle for bringing different and (disparate?) communities together to work in a different way than they would have if you’d created a centre or you had a stand alone grant.

Conclusion

We have drawn on a research-based consultation exercise, in order to review the issues, themes and directions that face social work research in the UK insofar as it engages with the government’s Economic and Social Research Council. We have reflected on judgements of research relevance, research users, research utilization, the social work contribution to the development of research methods, inter-disciplinary research, the question of whether there are distinctive attributes of social work research, research capacity, career building, priority setting, and the outcomes of social work funding bids. We also contemplate the implications for social work of the development and delivery of research programmes, and the implications of the invisibility of social work research within the ESRC.

One implication is that disciplines within universities are not fixed and abiding realities. ‘Recognizing’ social work is a dynamic, socially negotiated process, shaped by the construction and ordering of knowledge claims within social work and social science communities, and reflecting power differentials that are mediated through structural mechanisms that tend to exclude new ‘claimants’ such as social work. Given the majority assumptions about discipline boundaries held within established social science, the extent of any ignorance of social work within that wider social science field is unlikely to be easily recognized. We cited the acknowledgement from within that the ESRC has not been able to say, ‘this is our portfolio of social work research’ because information has not been collected in that way. There is an ambiguity close to the heart of the ESRC. To reiterate, on the one hand it is believed within the council that allegations that this or that discipline loses out in the funding decision-making process are ‘a triumph of perception over reality’, and that the data do not support the case for discrimination. Yet it is also accepted that non-recognized disciplines such as social work do not ‘count’ within the ESRC system and hence evidence is always inferred from stand-in, surrogate data that is, as we have illustrated, inadequate.

In tune with our understanding that the social work community should engage with ESRC research, there are various ways in which research programmes and
funding might be shaped. Where these lie within the power of the social work community, they include cultivating alertness to ESRC initiatives, offering to act as application assessors, facilitating a culture of regular bidding to the ESRC, and signalling clearly those bids that social work issues are present.

At the strategic level, there should be a lobby for a wider notion of research users and pressure for rigorous democratizing of the research process. Collectively within social work there should be the continued development of an informed strategy for research methodologies appropriate to social work and social care research and evaluation, a stronger consensus on national research priorities, and steps to facilitate an environment of mutual support in raising research bidding rates and standards.

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References

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