



Northern
Ireland
Office

ADDRESSING THE LEGACY OF THE PAST - MOVING NORTHERN IRELAND FORWARD

The Implementation and Reconciliation Group - Independent Academic Report

Purpose

The Stormont House Agreement (paragraph 51) states that the Implementation and Reconciliation Group (IRG) must commission a report on themes from independent academic experts. Clause 62(4) of the draft Bill requires that academic experts act independently, free from political influence and in a way that secures public confidence in their reports.

This paper considers how the academic expert work could be commissioned, taking into account issues of independence and impartiality; good governance and ethics; and ownership of research.

Commissioning academic research

Research councils are bodies that coordinate, provide support and fund research in specific disciplines. A research council model applies for commissioning of academic research in both the UK and in Ireland. Under this model:

- Broad research themes are set by the council to which academics respond;
- Multidisciplinary proposals are encouraged;
- Innovative methods of conducting research can be proposed;
- Peer-review of research applications is adopted;
- Application procedures can be structured to reflect the desired outcome of the research in terms of, for example, impact, rigour or cost effectiveness.

The approach outlined above would help to ensure high quality research. In addition, research councils require researchers to adhere to the highest standards of scientific and ethical practice, further ensuring professional standards are upheld. A research council approach could be adopted by the IRG in the way that it commissions research: this could involve the Economic and Social Research Council or other bodies including the Arts and Humanities Research Council, Irish Research Council or be run in cooperation with Universities Ireland.

Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

The ESRC provide funding and support for research in economic and social issues. As one of 7 UK Research Councils, they support independent, quality research

which has an impact on business, the public sector and civil society.

Their remit is to:

- promote and support high-quality research on social and economic issues;
- develop and support the national data infrastructure that underpins high-quality research;
- advance knowledge and provide trained social scientists who meet the needs of users and beneficiaries, thereby contributing to the economic competitiveness of the UK, the effectiveness of public services and policy, and quality of life;
- communicate clearly and promote public understanding of social science.

ESRC research often involves multidisciplinary teams and collaboration with other research councils, building strategic partnerships with academia, the public and private sector and civil society. ESRC provide business, public services and civil society organisations with access to world-leading academic researchers to support research activities.

The ESRC mostly commission research where they are involved as a co-funder. However, they also routinely provide advice and support to those seeking to benefit from their expertise and connections to academic networks. Such advice could typically include:

- how to commission a piece of research;
- suggesting suitable academic experts that the commissioning body might wish to consider to carry out their research;
- how to constitute an advisory or external stakeholder group;
- circulating notice of the commission call to their networks;
- how to guarantee independence in execution of the research project.

For example, when creating an advisory or external stakeholder group, the ESRC promote best practice as ensuring that:

- Membership has a mix of users and academics;
- When selecting group members, due consideration is given to achieving an appropriate balance in terms of gender and geographical location;
- Where group members hold party political appointments, consideration is given to achieving a balance with regard to this declared political allegiance;
- Members are aware of who has funded the project;
- Members are clear in their role on the group, including the potential to act as ambassadors on behalf of the group and what this implies;
- Members state any conflict of interests and political affiliations before joining the group, and this should be taken into account in the development of the agenda for all meetings.

The level of ESRC advisory support or involvement will vary depending on specific requirements of the commissioning body and subject to the time commitment required from ESRC staff.

Multidisciplinary teams and collaboration

Engaging multi-disciplinary teams to conduct research will facilitate collaboration between researchers skilled in a range of relevant disciplines, in addition to research project management expertise, including governance and ethics.

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The network of academics which the ESRC most frequently draws on to conduct research are those based in UK research institutions. However, their network extends beyond the UK and their global reach provides an opportunity to draw together internationally renowned experts across a diverse range of fields. For example, their key role in initiatives such as NORFACE¹ (New Opportunities for Research Funding Agency Co-operation in Europe) which is a collaborative partnership of national research funding agencies from 18 European countries in the area of social and behavioural sciences, mean they are well placed to recommend the best expert or consortia to deliver a particular project.

Research standards within the ESRC

The ESRC requires researchers that it supports to adhere to the highest standards of scientific and ethical practice. Researchers must have procedures in place for governing research practice, as set out in the Research Councils UK (RCUK) policy and guidelines² on governance of good research conduct. The ESRC also promote reference to the UK Research Integrity Office Code of Practice for Research³ which includes a recommended checklist summarising the key points of good practice in research and is based upon the more detailed standards provided in the Code.

Governance and ethics

ESRC have advised that all research projects with which they are involved must adhere to their governance and ethics frameworks, including in relation to misconduct and conflicts of interest.

'As the principal funding agency for UK social science research we require that the research we support is designed and conducted in such a way that it meets certain ethics principles, and is subject to proper professional and institutional oversight in terms of research governance.'

ESRC promote six key principles for ethical research:

- Research should aim to maximise benefit for individuals and society and minimise risk and harm;
- The rights and dignity of individuals and groups should be respected;
- Wherever possible, participation should be voluntary and appropriately informed;

¹ <https://www.norface.net/about-norface/>

² <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/publications/researchers/grc>

³ <http://ukrio.org/publications/code-of-practice-for-research/>

- Research should be conducted with integrity and transparency;
- Lines of responsibility and accountability should be clearly defined;
- Independence of research should be maintained and where conflicts of interest cannot be avoided they should be made explicit.

In addition, academic staff involved in ESRC research projects must adhere to the Codes of Research including gaining approval from relevant Ethics Committees, as required by their employing academic institutions.

Typically, these frameworks are considered to provide adequate assurances of good governance and ethical practice. Whilst it may not be standard practice, the ESRC have confirmed that it would be possible to include such experts on a research team, if desired, as part of the commission. The ESRC are also well placed to provide support on this issue and have experience in constituting panels to advise on ethics issues when assessing research proposals for funding.

Ownership of research

All academic institutions will have in place a Code of Research to ensure the highest standards of professionalism in research and to promote good research practice and governance. This includes guidelines in respect of ownership of research and sets out researchers' responsibilities, which include to:

- clarify at the outset any issues regarding the ownership of the data used or created in the course of the research and also the results of the work;
- resolve any issues regarding ownership, putting in place appropriate agreements or contracts before research commences;
- keep clear and accurate records of the procedures followed and the approvals granted during the research process, including records of interim results and final research outcomes.

In addition, the UK Research Integrity Office publishes guidelines⁴ state that :

'Researchers should ensure that any contracts or agreements relating to research include provision for ownership and use of intellectual property, including research data and other findings of research; ideas, processes; and literary works, including academic and scientific publications.'

Questions for consideration

The ESRC potentially provides a useful model to address issues about how to ensure independence and impartiality, good governance and ethics practice and clarity around ownership of research. The proposals have been discussed with the ESRC who have confirmed they would be prepared to support the IRG in either way outlined below.

The consultation on addressing the legacy of the past invites responses to the question:

Do you think that the ESRC should be engaged to commission the academic

⁴ <http://ukrio.org/wp-content/uploads/UKRIO-Code-of-Practice-for-Research.pdf>

work on patterns and themes to ensure independence, impartiality and best practice in academic research?

If this proposal is supported after consideration of the consultation, the IRG, when established will need to consider whether,

The ESRC should be asked explicitly to commission the academic work on behalf of the IRG? or

Should the ESRC be engaged to provide support and advice to the IRG on how to commission the academic work?

The advantage of the ESRC commissioning the research on the IRG's behalf is that there would be a requirement for academic experts to be aware of and abide by the ESRC principles, policy and guidelines for good practice codes on governance, ethics and research practice, as outlined above. If the ESRC were to act as advisers to the IRG in commissioning the research, it would be the responsibility of the IRG to ensure that frameworks to control research practice were in place and adhered to.

The UK Government are ready take forward further discussions with the ESRC and thereafter to offer further information against either option on the ESRC's role.