

Evaluation of the ESRC 2001 Census Programme (2006 – 2011)

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Executive Summary

This evaluation of the 2006-2011 ESRC Census Programme sets out to provide an overall assessment of the quality, usage and impact of services and research funded by the Programme. This evaluation assesses the overall strengths and weaknesses of the Programme and provides recommendations on continued funding for the Programme beyond 2011, taking into account other existing data infrastructure funded by the ESRC and the three UK census organisations' plans for the 2011 Census.

The ESRC Census Programme currently funds the activities of a Programme Co-ordinator and 8 Census Data Support Units (DSUs); the Longitudinal Studies Centre - Scotland (LSCS); the Samples of Anonymised Records at the Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research (SARs at CCSR); the Census Registration Service (CRS)/Census Portal; Centre for Longitudinal Study Information and User Support (CeLSIUS); Centre for Interaction Data Estimation and Research (CIDER); Census Dissemination Unit (CDU), UKBORDERS (UKB) and the Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study Research Support Unit (NILS-RSU).

The main overarching objective of the ESRC Census Programme is to provide academic access to UK census data through a framework for data acquisition, user registration, access software and expert support.

The findings from the annual user surveys provide a clear endorsement of the activities of the DSUs in relation to providing access to data, the provision of help facilities and data. This is exemplified by high levels of overall satisfaction with each DSU. There is little evidence to suggest that use of these services is declining towards the end of the decade when it could be argued that interest in 2001 Census data might be expected to decline (see Section 4). Expert users generally consider that the DSUs are doing a very good job in the context of the external constraints under which they have to operate (see Section 4.i for specific examples).

We summarise below the main findings and recommendations that have emerged from the evaluation:

Overall we consider the services supported by the Census Programme to be a very important ESRC investment (see Section 7.i). However, the future development of the Programme needs to be carefully considered against a likely funding squeeze, technological developments and a rapidly changing data provision environment, including the future of the census itself.

The Programme Co-ordinator appears to have played an instrumental role in many of the successes in the current phase of the Programme (see Section 5). However, a number of issues have emerged during the current phase of the Programme, which would suggest that

the role of the Coordinator has become more complex. We would recommend that consideration be given towards increasing the resource allocated to this role.

More attention should be paid to the timing of funding over the census cycle, with more resources allocated at the start of the period. Overall, the funding of development projects is regarded as a success (see Section 4.iii) and strong consideration should be given to allocating an increased proportion of the Programme's funding through this type of mechanism.

Use of the Longitudinal Studies is constrained by the restrictive arrangements surrounding accessing the data and this has led to inequities in access (see Section 4.ii). The ESRC could conduct a feasibility study to investigate options surrounding access to the Longitudinal Studies and census microdata.

The relationship between the three Longitudinal Studies and existing ESRC investments in longitudinal surveys should be reviewed (see Section 6). There would seem to be the opportunity to exploit economies of scale through increased co-operation and/or integration between the three longitudinal studies and arrangements made for the cohort studies.

Greater emphasis could be placed on the benefits of using census data in terms of capacity development within the social sciences (see Section 6). Linked PhD bursaries should be integrated into the Programme (possibly as a way of funding support officers), which again could be placed in an open competition.

The 2011 Census Programme should take advantage of the move towards a new delivery system to re-design the DSU websites (see Section 4.i). There needs to be a much stronger branding of the Census Programme across the websites than there is currently.

UKBORDERS is a unique DSU and is essential to the Census Programme but is currently restricted to how it can deliver its products (see Section 4.ii). The ESRC should consider negotiating open license agreements so that UKBORDERS can function more fully and provide a more sophisticated and creative service.

The backdrop to the next Census Programme is one of a rapidly changing data landscape and the prospect that the 2011 Census will be the last (see Section 6). The ESRC should consider future alternatives to census-like data when formulating a programme of development projects, such as linking administrative data.

The Co-ordinator needs to continue to emphasise benefits from greater integration, standardisation and harmonisation of 2011 Census outputs (see Section 6). Differences in approaches to data security and data sharing between census organisations are also inhibiting possibilities for UK wide research. The 2011 Census Programme should have provision for the maintenance and development of legacy data, especially with the rolling out of new delivery systems.

The ESRC needs to take a consistent view regarding the core activities and functions of the DSUs (see Section 7.iii). Detailed work plans and targets covering these and user support activities need to be developed to ensure that the ESRC, users and stakeholders

can confidently feel that the balance of these activities is right. The DSUs should also have clear exit and hand over strategies.