

# Research ethics

By *Ceridwen Roberts*

Are you exercised by issues in research ethics? The SRA is finding that more people are concerned about how to handle ethical scrutiny and asking for help on ethical queries. Over the last couple of months, the SRA has contributed to the ESRC Research Ethics Framework consultation; advised a major social research funder about how to handle ethical scrutiny issues for independent researchers in the absence of institutional structures; and dealt with a range of diverse ethical queries through the SRA Ethics Forum. The SRA is also jointly organising, with the Academy of Social Science, a major conference on ethical scrutiny.

What is behind all this flurry of activity? In January 2005, David Brindle of the Guardian wrote about the enormous amount of paper and time which was being consumed to get ethical clearance for research in the health field. This was not just restricted to health researchers but to everyone aiming to do social science research which involved the NHS in the smallest degree. Since then, ethical scrutiny and the problems of obtaining clearance have grown apace. Systems of regulation have spread, through the pressure of funders and the government, to social science activity more broadly whether this was academically funded or not. There are now extensive hierarchies of committees in universities,

developing mechanisms for scrutiny in social care, local government and agencies and also in the larger social research agencies. At the same time, there has been a growth of interest in, and courses on, research ethics training.

How well is everything working? The SRA response to the ESRC consultation\* identified some important concerns about the ESRC framework which mirror wider issues. As research techniques and issues are constantly changing, any system of scrutiny/regulation needs to be responsive to these changes. Since the ESRC Framework was introduced some three years ago, there has been a growth in participatory research, in internet-based research and more use of visual and image-based research which raises new issues of anonymity and consent as well as concern about the consequences of ownership and control for the growth of digitized data. But not all expert committees or mechanisms of review are equipped to handle these innovations

SRA members have also told us that there is inconsistency in how different committees treat social science research and there is considerable confusion about how they treat institutional risk, research risk and risk of harm to participants. So, for many, the difference between independent ethical review and governance is unclear. The culture of some committees is adversarial and some lack adequate expert knowledge. The SRA urged the ESRC to do

more to encourage a supportive approach by ethics scrutiny committees and, of course, raising levels of ethical awareness at all levels is key here.

A very big problem is the disproportionate amount of work getting ethical clearance involves, sometimes for very non-contentious research. There are real resource implications, both for the staff time spent providing detailed information often to several layers of committees and, importantly, the lapsed time effects. Research cannot start until clearance is received but, in some cases, getting this takes the first few months of a project. Funders sometimes appear unaware of the implications this has for the timing and funding of projects.

The SRA, like many professional associations and learned societies, has long had its own ethical guidelines. Published originally in the early 1980s and revised in 2003, they have proved invaluable to SRA members and non-members alike in clearly stating the guiding principles behind ethical practice. Available in pdf on our website, they have been downloaded by thousands of people across the world and form the basis of many other organisations' own guides. We are planning to update them once some funding has been obtained. This time, they will be web-based and so allow for greater flexibility as new issues appear and a more interactive approach.

Social scientists and researchers across all sectors are being affected by the growth of ethical regulation. Some, like Professor Robert Dingwall of Nottingham University who is

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speaking at the May conference, have been very critical of the bureaucratisation of ethical scrutiny. Many are worried that the pressures of scrutiny will militate against innovative methods or research on sensitive topics or lead to students doing less empirical work. There is also concern that too often scrutiny committees are dominated by non social scientists. This is particularly an issue in social care.

Ethical scrutiny is no doubt here to stay but it is important that the social research community engages effectively in all the discussions about improving the systems and this mean being proactive. We need to ensure that our guidelines are clear and up to date; that we are encouraging effective training of students and inexperienced staff; and that we create a climate in which ethical dilemmas are recognised as such and can be constructively discussed.

To help take this forward, the SRA is joining with the Academy of Social Science to mount a conference in London on 11th May. We have kept the fee as low as possible aided by support from the Nuffield Foundation and hope to see you there. If social researchers don't say what we want or think is a suitable way forward then others, many of whom are less familiar with social research than us, will do it for us.

\* Compiled by Dr Ron Iphofen, convenor of the SRA Ethics Forum with contributions from the forum and SRA members (see [www.the-sra.org.uk](http://www.the-sra.org.uk)).

Academy of Social Sciences/Social Research Association Conference

## Ethics in social science: regulation, review or scrutiny?

May 11, 9.30–4pm

Amnesty International UK, 17–25 New Inn Yard, London EC2A 3EA

This conference will examine how the current and developing system of reviewing/scrutinising/regulating social science research projects is working and how it might best be developed in the future. It is relevant to people across the social science community involved in the process of 'reviewing' the ethics of particular research projects or with experience of submitting or supervising proposals for review. The day is in two parts, the morning on the policy aspects and the overall system and the afternoon on aspects of practice, with time for discussion and exchange of views.

### Programme

#### Morning: Reviewing the system of research ethics scrutiny

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| 9.30      | Registration and coffee   |
| 10.00     | <b>Welcome and introduction by chair</b><br><i>Ceridwen Roberts, University of Oxford</i>   |
| 10.10     | <b>The current system, do we need a paradigm shift?</b><br><i>Presentation from Professor Robert Dingwall, University of Nottingham</i><br><b>Respondent: Sharon Witherspoon, The Nuffield Foundation</b> |
| 10.45     | Questions and discussion  |
| 11.10     | <b>The relationship between ethics review and research governance</b> <i>Dr Ron Iphofen</i>   |
| 11.30     | <b>Towards principled ethics review</b><br><i>John Oates, The Open University/AREC/BPS</i>  |
| 11.50     | Questions and discussion  |
| 12.15     | <b>Enhancing ethical awareness through increased ethical scrutiny: a case study</b><br><i>Sam Clemens, National Centre for Social Research</i>  |
| 12.35     | Questions and discussion  |
| 1.00–2.00 | Lunch   |

#### Afternoon: Research ethics in practice

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|-----------|--|
| 2.00–3.30 | <b>Workshops</b><br>The main focus will be on the way in which the morning's points apply and what changes would be of benefit. The four topics are: <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Social science research and the NHS Research Ethics Committees – current issues</li><li>2. Social care – current plans and their implications</li><li>3. University Research Ethics Committees – how they are working</li><li>4. Teaching ethical awareness and developing engagement in ethical issues among social science researchers.</li></ol> Each workshop will begin with a 10–15 minute commentary highlighting key points, followed by general discussion. |
| 3.30      | <b>Plenary: next steps</b>   |
| 4.00      | Close and tea  |

# Looking forward

The new SRA chair, **Mark Wardman**, gives his first report



It is a great pleasure to pen my first editorial for SRA News. I am greatly looking forward to the next two years when my aim will be to help to build on the successes of my illustrious predecessors as the SRA moves into its fourth decade.

This is my second spell in helping to run the SRA, and it looks and feels like a different organisation now compared with just five years ago. You will know that the SRA has been through some important legal changes in the past year. Incorporation and achieving charitable status were significant developments which have made us more fit for purpose for the future.

As a result of these changes, it was important for us to spend time on improving our governance arrangements. But with these improvements now bedded in, we can turn our minds to the future and the challenges and opportunities it will bring.

Current economic problems make it likely that the immediate future will be testing and turbulent for all of us, whatever sector we work in. For those of you who are personally affected by the downturn, I would like, on behalf of the board, to wish you well and to express my hope that things pick up soon.

It is not possible yet to detect any significant adverse effect on the SRA itself, although we have noticed some decline in advertising revenue in recent months. But thanks to the efforts of Barbara Doig, my predecessor as chair, and to Nigel

Goldie and his team in the office, we are in a stronger position financially than in recent years. We have more members than ever before and our training courses and events continue to be well subscribed and thought of. We continue to lead debate on research ethics and on better research commissioning.

Economic and possibly political change will generate intensive debate about the direction of social policy. We know that political discourse through the media often leads to distortion and exaggeration, as claim and counter-claim compete for attention. It will be all the more important for the SRA to promote the role of social research in providing evidence to inform that debate. This will help to ensure we can fulfil our charitable purpose to enhance the role of social research for wider public benefit.

The new SRA board will develop a strategy to achieve this over the next two years. Despite the recession, we think there are many opportunities for the SRA to expand its role and functions. We want to develop a public affairs strategy that clearly sets out how we can represent your and the public's interests in good social research practice. We are exploring whether we can develop an international presence. We want to broaden our membership, particularly among younger researchers (and to reach out to those considering research as a career) and in the English regions. We are exploring whether and how to

create a framework for professional development applicable to all who work in social research, in all sectors. We need to consider whether we should do more in partnership with organisations, which share our objectives, so that we achieve more, and more cost-effectively, than we can on our own.

In many ways, the SRA's unique cross-sector status makes us the natural home for a social research 'community of practice'. We are well placed to stimulate and participate in debates and initiatives which contribute to public policy and further the interests of social research and those who work in it.

I am particularly keen on exploring how our members can be more actively involved in helping the SRA achieve its objectives. We need to consider how new technology can offer us different and better ways of having dialogue with you. In the meantime, I invite you to contribute your thoughts on this or on other matters by emailing me at [chair@the-sra.org.uk](mailto:chair@the-sra.org.uk)

## SRA ANNUAL CONFERENCE: CALL FOR PAPERS

# Moving on up – social mobility and social research

*Tuesday 15 December, Brunei Gallery, SOAS, University of London*

*Promoting social mobility has long been high on the political agenda and remains a key policy issue in the current economic climate. Social research has a major role in measuring social mobility, evaluating policies to promote social mobility and providing the evidence base to underpin new initiatives.*

The SRA welcomes abstracts for presentations for both plenary (30 minutes) and workshop sessions (45 minutes) which address the overall conference theme or discuss, explore or reflect on the following aspects of social mobility:

- **Measuring social mobility** – methodological approaches and challenges
- **Factors affecting social mobility** – including education and training, ethnicity, child poverty, employment and the role of the third sector
- **Social mobility trends** – how social mobility has changed over time and policies/initiatives which have caused it to increase or deteriorate
- **Conceptual issues** – including the relationship between social mobility, equalities and equal opportunities
- **Different perspectives** – the different data sets, research and policy approaches to measuring and addressing social mobility across Britain and Ireland
- **The international perspective** – comparative approaches to measuring social mobility and learning lessons from elsewhere

The SRA is looking for informative and innovative presentations and workshops from social researchers across national and local government, academia, and the independent, commercial and voluntary sectors. At the heart of the SRA is a commitment to the promotion and dissemination of sound and innovative social research methods. We encourage submissions which reflect this aim. For the workshops, we particularly welcome submissions

which involve a participatory element with conference attendees.

To be considered for either a workshop or plenary presentation, please send by **Thursday 25 June** your abstract (500 words maximum, which should include a description of your research methodology if appropriate) along with:

- your name
- affiliation
- contact details (including email address)
- presentation or workshop title
- details about which theme your abstract reflects (if appropriate)

to Mark Yeadon (chair, SRA events committee)  
Email: [mark.yeadon@walthamforest.gov.uk](mailto:mark.yeadon@walthamforest.gov.uk)  
Phone: 020 8496 4472

Please make the subject line of your email “SRA 2009 Abstract” and include your name. Make sure you add your name to any attachments. Please do not send completed presentations or papers. Once your abstract has been received, we will send a confirmation email.

**All those whose abstracts are accepted are expected to book a place at the conference and pay a reduced delegate fee. Co-presenters will also be required to register and pay a reduced fee. More details about the conference will be announced by the SRA in due course.**

### *SRA Summer Event:*

## **Looking in to the future – methods, challenges and policy impacts of futures research techniques**

Tuesday 7 July, 1.30–5pm (followed by complimentary drinks reception)

*Local Government Association Offices, Local Government House, Smith Square, London, SW1P 3HZ*

This event will discuss the different methodological approaches to conducting futures research; the challenges and implications of using the techniques; and examples of where futures research has had an impact on policy development locally and nationally.

### *Cathie Marsh Lecture, joint SRA/Royal Statistical Society (RSS) event:*

## **Understanding non-response and reducing non-response bias**

Tuesday 17 November 2009, 5.00–7pm (followed by complimentary drinks reception)  
*RSS, 12 Errol Street, London, EC1Y 8LX*

This event will provide an overview of the state of knowledge with this important issue and then explore the implications of non-response and techniques for reducing non-response bias. The subject is part of the ESRC Survey Design and Measurement Initiative.

**For a full programme and speaker details for all SRA events see: [www.the-sra.org.uk](http://www.the-sra.org.uk)**

## **Two heads are better than one**

Teresa Williams and Catriona Mirrlees-Black have taken up a jobshare as Head of Evidence & Analysis at the Office for Criminal Justice Reform (located in Ministry of Justice, but working jointly to MoJ, Home Office and the Attorney General). The Evidence & Analysis Unit, which is a multidisciplinary team of analysts drawn from operational research, statistics and social research backgrounds, provides analysis to help raise performance across the criminal justice system (at local and national level) on issues like public confidence in the CJS, experiences of victims and witness, the performance of the service in bringing offences to justice, and modelling of capacity and costs across the service. They are (they believe) the first

jobshare within GSR and hope to act as role models for others in GSR (which is a female dominated profession) who are looking for more flexible ways to manage a work-life balance. Dr Siobhan Campbell will act as Head of GSR until a permanent replacement is appointed.

## **New Academician – John Wicks**

Congratulations to John Wicks who has become an Academician of the Academy of Social Sciences. John is the Director of Social and Market Research at MVA Consultancy. John Wicks has responsibility for social and market research throughout MVA Consultancy. During more than 39 years' experience, he has applied his research skills to many fields, including public and private transport, traffic, community safety, policing, civil law, planning, housing, health, social services, water, energy, engineering, telecommunications, information technology, sport, leisure, tourism, education, training and employee attitudes. His work has embraced outcome and process evaluation, policy research and monitoring and attitude and behaviour research using both qualitative and quantitative techniques.



John was nominated individually by longstanding SRA member Nick Moon and seconded by Ceridwen Roberts. He joins the growing number of SRA members to be successfully nominated to the ACSS.

**A new round of nominations is in progress and so SRA members are invited to make suggestions for nominations to the SRA Board. Please send your suggestions with a short reason why to Dr Nigel Goldie: [nigel.goldie@the-sra.org.uk](mailto:nigel.goldie@the-sra.org.uk)**

## **Sunningdale Institute calls for reconnection of government policy with frontline services**

The re-invention of policy making to ensure delivery of cost effective and efficient services responsive to people's needs is proposed by the National School's Sunningdale Institute in a recent report. Engagement and Aspiration: reconnecting policy making with front-line professionals, commissioned by the Cabinet Office, looks at how to develop better links between Whitehall policy makers and front-line professionals to drive forward public service reform.

**Read the report at [www.nationalschool.gov.uk/downloads/EngagementandAspirationReport.pdf](http://www.nationalschool.gov.uk/downloads/EngagementandAspirationReport.pdf)**

## SRA SCOTLAND:

*Julie Carr and Sarah Miller report*

### Training

We continued to run qualitative and quantitative research courses. The quantitative courses, delivered by Dr Pamela Campanelli, include questionnaire design, survey implementation, survey sampling and basic statistical analysis. The qualitative courses, delivered by Liz Spencer, cover qualitative research design, data analysis, and interpreting and writing-up qualitative findings.

Future training will be for early career stage researchers interested in developing their research skills and experienced researchers wanting to refresh their skills. For more information see [www.the-sra.org.uk](http://www.the-sra.org.uk) or look out for email updates.

### Seminars

Our seminar series continues with Professor David Miller, on Investigative Social Research: The Role of Public Relations and Lobbying in Political Culture (University of Strathclyde). If you would like to suggest seminars topic or volunteer to run one, Katherine and Stephen would be pleased to hear from you ([katherine.myant@scotland.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:katherine.myant@scotland.gsi.gov.uk); [mcmurraystephen@hotmail.com](mailto:mcmurraystephen@hotmail.com)).

### Events

We took part in a Burns Supper with the Scotland branch of the Market Research Society. We organised a Careers in Social Research event, hosted by the Careers Service at the University of Strathclyde. The event, sponsored by Blake Stevenson, was well-attended by undergraduate and postgraduate students, from a range of Scottish universities, interested in pursuing a career in social research. Researchers from the public (Sarah Miller, Scottish Government), commercial (Lorraine Simpson, Blake Stevenson) and academic sectors (Ingrid Holme, University of Stirling) gave talks on their work, and Steven Hope (Ipsos MORI) and Fiona Dobbie (ScotCen) also contributed to panel discussions.

We are planning the annual event and a networking event for freelance researchers, so watch this space for further information. We look forward to seeing you at future events.

For more information, contact Lindsay Adams: [Scotland@the-sra.org.uk](mailto:Scotland@the-sra.org.uk); Julie Carr: [Julie.carr@scotland.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Julie.carr@scotland.gsi.gov.uk) (0131 244 0328); Sarah Miller: [sarah.miller@scotland.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:sarah.miller@scotland.gsi.gov.uk) (0131 244 0055)

## SRA CYMRU:

*Beverley Morgan and Natalie Ellis bring the news from Wales*

### Training

Over the last three months, SRA Cymru has run several evening seminars and training events for social researchers in Wales. This has included a course on questionnaire design run by colleagues at ONS in Newport and on quality in social research designed for mid-career and senior researchers. In June, the SRA "approaches to evaluation" course runs in Cardiff (date to be confirmed).

### Seminars

Evening seminars have also continued, including one led by researchers at Cardiff Council on the use of scrutiny research to inform the development of policy practice in Cardiff Local Authority. Future evening seminars will include a presentation by Chris Roberts from the Welsh Assembly Government on the use of Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study data as a tool to inform health policy decisions in Wales. This is being held in Cathays Park (Welsh Assembly Government) and those interested in attending should contact Natalie Ellis. The programme of evening seminars will continue throughout 2009 and will include an event focusing on the Welsh Assembly Government's "monitors" – which includes the 2008 Children and Young People's Well-being Monitor for Wales and the forthcoming 2009 Older People's Well-being Monitor for Wales.

### Events

SRA Cymru is also planning to hold a summer event at the beginning of July 2009. This will focus on longitudinal research (and methods) – and includes a discussion of findings from some of the UK's longitudinal and cohort studies.

To find out more about the SRA Cymru network or to join our mailing list for news about upcoming training and seminars, please contact either Beverley Morgan ([beverley.morgan@wales.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:beverley.morgan@wales.gsi.gov.uk)) or Natalie Ellis ([natalie.ellis@wales.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:natalie.ellis@wales.gsi.gov.uk)) at the Office of the Chief Social Research Officer, Welsh Assembly Government. We are also very happy to provide information on previous seminars and events which colleagues have been unable to attend.

We look forward to seeing you at future events in Wales!

# What's in a title?

By *Nigel Goldie*, Executive Director, SRA

Recently applying online for car insurance, I spent several frustrating minutes trying to find from the list of jobs, one that matched my post as CEO of the SRA. The closest was managing director of a trade association. This, along with trying to simplify how we record 'job titles' on the SRA member database, has led me to speculate on what it means to be a 'social researcher'. This takes on wider significance in the context of the future development of the SRA – something the board will be considering shortly. It is evident from membership surveys that there is interest in the SRA raising standards both through general methods such as training, and by developing professional standards and competencies. These are predicated on the assumption that there is a growing occupational identity to being a 'social researcher'.

This takes me back to the issue of job titles. From over 1,100 members, only seven employed by organisations have the words 'social research' in their job titles, with a further 19 having the word 'social'. This may be because members give us generic or abbreviated titles such as 'research officer', 'consultant' or 'lecturer'. Where it is used, this tends to be among more recent members, suggesting it might become more common. By contrast, 75 self-employed and hence 'independent' members use the designation 'social researcher'.

The titles used by members raise some other issues about working in social research. Placed in order of frequency, our members are called:

Research officer	96
Independent	75
Senior research officer	69
Director (of research)	48
Researcher	36
Principal researcher	33
Consultant	33
Research executive	32
Associate director	27
Research assistant	21
Professor	20
Lecturers (incl senior)	19
Research fellows	16
Research associates	17

In total, there are 240 different titles, 65 of which are attributable to only one member. (112 members have not given job titles.) Within many titles, there are gradations, for example, 'senior principal researcher' (6) and smaller groups such as 'evaluation and research' (11) research analyst (10). When matched with the employers of 'social researchers' (around 350), it indicates the varied career routes available to young researchers.

Of the 100 most recently recruited members, most are women in their 20s and 30s, with a third having 'senior' or equivalent in their titles. Our membership generally has a significant number of managerial and senior executive roles with 405 members employed as 'chief research

*There is a growing occupational identity to being a 'social researcher'*

officers', 'senior lecturers' or 'senior research officers'.

The diversity within the profession is replicated in job adverts placed on the SRA website. An analysis of the 50 most recent posts placed by 46 different employers indicates a wide range of job titles.

These findings are open to interpretation but it seems significant that those working independently are most likely to use the term 'social researcher' to describe what they do. They have a choice and this perhaps reflects a greater awareness of what it means to have a professional identity, and the independence of judgement and confidence to apply research knowledge to policy and practice. More so than colleagues working within large organisations.

**What do you think? It would be good to hear the views of members on these matters.**

# VAT and research – many shades of grey?

By **Nigel Bilsbrough**, Finance and Resources Manager, Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP) Department of Social Sciences Loughborough University Leicestershire and Nigel Meager, Director of the Institute for Employment Studies

VAT is charged on most business-to-business and business-to-consumer transactions. VAT is charged to a buyer by a VAT registered seller. It can usually be reclaimed by a VAT registered buyer after goods and services are purchased subject to certain restrictions.

For VAT to be charged there has to be a business supply: money received in exchange for goods or services.

So, in undertaking research, is there a supply for VAT purposes? If no supply can be established then it is outside the scope of VAT but routinely where intellectual property (IP) is transferred, or shared, with the funder, or royalties granted, then there is a supply.

However, this supply may still be exempt if it can be shown that it is research and is being supplied by an 'eligible body' (e.g. a government department, charity, university, school, or local authority) to another 'eligible body'. An eligible body can provide education, research and/or vocational training services exempt from VAT:

*If the supply is for research, and it is for an eligible body such as a government department by an eligible body such as a UK based higher education institution (HEI), then VAT is not chargeable.*

Unfortunately, whereas what constitutes an "eligible body" is made very clear in HMRC notice 701/30 (January 2002), "research" is not defined in legislation. HMRC

says it is "original investigation undertaken in order to gain, advance or expand knowledge and understanding", but that it is the parties' intention at the start of a project which determines the nature of the supply. It is also made clear that consultancy is not research, but consultancy is itself not defined.

Does any of this really matter if VAT can be reclaimed in any case?

In the increasingly common scenarios where research is supplied by a consortium of providers, some of which may be eligible bodies, e.g. HEI-based research centres and others not, e.g. independent research institutes, market research centres or consultancies, then things become a little more complicated.

Let us take as an example a research project being commissioned by a government department (GD), an eligible body, with the work being undertaken by an HEI-based research centre (RCHE), an eligible body<sup>1</sup>, in partnership with an independent research institute (IRI), not an eligible body.

If the customer, GD, lets two separate contracts then it is fairly straightforward. The RCHE, is an eligible body supplying research to another eligible body so VAT is not chargeable. The IRI supply will be subject to VAT, but the GD can reclaim this so, in effect, the whole contract is VAT free.

However, most research commissioners prefer to let one

contract to a lead supplier and then let them sub-contract the other party. Does this make a difference to the VAT picture?

Unfortunately, it appears it can.

If the GD lets the main contract to the IRI which sub-contracts the RCHE then the RCHE's supply becomes VATable as it is now supplying a non-eligible body. So, when the IRI invoices the customer for all the work undertaken, by themselves and by their sub-contractor, it is all subject to VAT. However, as this will be shown net on their invoices, the GD can reclaim it.

But, if the main contract is let to the RCHE which sub-contracts the IRI, the IRI's work is still VATable, but they will now be invoicing the RCHE. However, their supply is research from an eligible body to another eligible body, so they cannot reclaim the VAT on IRI's work and, therefore, have to pass their gross costs on to the customer.

This makes the second scenario more expensive for the customer simply as an (unintended?) consequence of different contracting routes and thus may militate, against the RCHE possibly being awarded the contract in the first place.

Further complexities may be relevant. Firstly, some not-for-profit, charitable research institutes are not exempt. This applies, for example, to the Institute for Employment Studies, a non-profit, registered charity. It is, however, required by HMRC to charge VAT on activities, including research commissioned by government departments, for which some other research organisations would not charge VAT.

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<sup>1</sup> However, not all HEI based research centres are classed as eligible bodies by HMRC. This is particularly so where the centre provides a range of services, not just research, such as consultancy, teaching, etc. This then has the effect of making all their supply subject to VAT, including research.



# The ESRC Methods Centre – five years in

By *Chris Skinner*, University of Southampton

The ESRC National Centre for Research Methods has now been operating for five years. This article sketches what it has been up to and some of the issues it is addressing.

In commissioning the centre, ESRC was looking to establish a more integrated approach to sustaining the UK's position at the international cutting edge of social research methodology as well as to integrate methodological innovation with ESRC's broader strategy to enhance the capacity of the UK social science research community to deliver high quality research. Taking account of the dispersed nature of UK methodological expertise across quantitative and qualitative methods, ESRC decided to fund the centre with a distributed 'hub' and 'node' structure with both research and capacity building objectives.

Groups from across the UK with established records of methodological excellence have been funded as centre 'nodes' to conduct world class research at the frontiers of methodological development and to build the next generation of leaders in research methodology. Nodes are also funded to build the capacity of the social science research community to make effective use of methodological skills and techniques. They have been commissioned on a three-year rotating basis: six in phase I (2005–2008) and seven in phase II (2008–11).

The centre's 'hub' at the University of Southampton has a range of longer-term strategic, coordination and communications functions to ensure not only the integration of

the centre as a whole but also to enable it to provide a focal point for national activities in research methods. Additional hub functions include preparing reports to inform strategy; commissioning Networks of Methodological Innovation; and administering a training bursary scheme.

The centre seeks to enhance the methodological capacity of the UK social science research community in various ways. It acts as a focal point for national activities delivered by a range of providers. Researchers are increasingly using the centre as the first port of call to find out about research methods events; 3,000 researchers now subscribe to the centre's monthly email bulletin; many find out about training opportunities by searching the events database on the centre's website at [www.ncrm.ac.uk](http://www.ncrm.ac.uk). Other online services are also being developed. The ePrints repository on the website provides access to many centre outputs. Online learning resources are also available – see for example the multilevel modelling online course at [www.cmm.bristol.ac.uk/learning-training/course.shtml](http://www.cmm.bristol.ac.uk/learning-training/course.shtml).

About 1,000 researchers annually now participate in the centre's programme of face-to-face training events. These operate particularly in the nodes' areas of methodological focus and include the long-standing courses in applied social surveys. The biennial Research Methods Festival is the centre's flagship event. It provides an opportunity for researchers to find out about the many developments taking place

in methods, with the potential to follow these up via centre training. The centre also runs a summer school for early career researchers and supports linked studentships and fellowships.

There are many aspects of training and capacity building in research methods which remain on the centre's agenda for further strategic development in conjunction with other stakeholders. Ways of ensuring better matches between researcher needs and training provision need to be developed, for example through clearer skills frameworks and mechanisms for progression. There are needs for better coordination between different sectors and meshing with systems of continuing professional development. Infrastructure will need integration with ESRC's new plans for postgraduate training and its potential investment in undergraduate methods training. Better differentiation and integration of national and regional infrastructure is needed, in particular given ESRC's recent cooperation with higher education funding councils in England, Wales and Scotland to strengthen methodological capacity building.

And finally, on a personal note, after five years in post I have decided to step down as centre director on 31 August, to enable me to devote more time to other activities, whilst continuing to participate in the centre. I am delighted that Patrick Sturgis, Professor of Research Methods at the University of Southampton, will take over as director. He brings wide-ranging relevant experience to inform the centre's development in its next five year term.

# Twenty five years of British Social Attitudes

By *Alison Park*, co-director of the British Social Attitudes survey at NatCen

In January we celebrated the publication of the 25th British Social Attitudes report, based on the long-running survey series. It began many years ago in 1983, when it was initiated by NatCen (then known as Social and Community Planning Research or SCPR). Then, CDs and camcorders were the latest technology, and New Romantics the height of fashion. Emails, laptops and mobile phones were still some way over the horizon; the cutting edge of research was very much a paper-based endeavour. I didn't join the team until 1995, but my colleagues told me tales of voluminous paper-based questionnaires coded and analysed using holes punched into cards. Nowadays we work with 21st century technology, sending our interviewers into people's homes armed with laptops, allowing more complex question design and speeding up the time it takes us to get data.

## Why research attitudes? How?

Tracing attitudes over time has always been key to our approach, although we do add new topics too. Many questions are asked year after year, or at regular intervals. By repeating the same questions over time and mapping the changing distribution of the answers, we're getting an important indication of social change. In his foreword to the report on the first survey, Sir Claus Moser observed: "What makes the series so important is precisely that it is a series. It is from the monitoring and understanding of trends in attitudes that one can learn most about what is happening in a society."

One of the preconceptions, which we always try to challenge, is a lazy idea that it doesn't matter what people think, so long as we know what people are actually doing. Worse, there are often assumptions about what people are going to think, based on anecdotal evidence and stereotypes. The British Social Attitudes series aims to help policy-makers and researchers gain a more sophisticated understanding of people's views, and to chart how these views are shifting. An important aspect of our approach is to avoid relying only on a single question when considering views

about a particular topic; as this readership will be all too aware, the wording of a question can be crucial in determining the sorts of responses people give – making it essential to develop multiple measures.

Each year, our funding comes from a variety of government departments, which helps keep the series policy-relevant, and we also regularly win grants from organisations such as the ESRC.

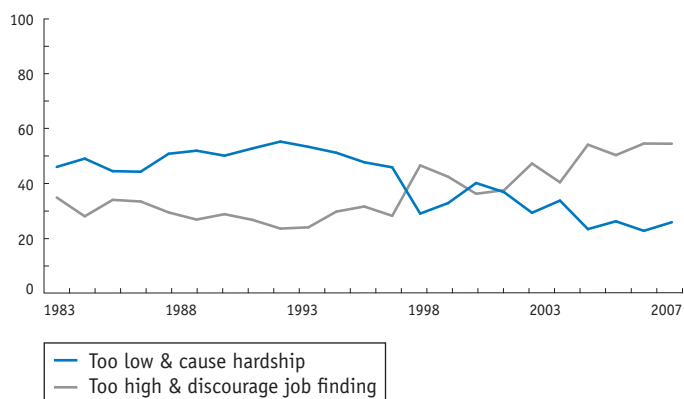
From a starting sample size of 1,700 in 1983, we now routinely interview between 3,300 and 4,400 people every year. Over its lifetime, around 75,000 people have kindly given their time to our interviewers. However, one of the drawbacks of the BSA is that, because its sample is proportionate to the population of the UK as a whole, it has a limited number of respondents in Scotland and Wales. So, there is now a regular Scottish Social Attitudes survey, as well as periodic surveys in Wales, which allow us to examine, in more detail, attitudes and values in those countries, and to tackle issues of particular importance there. The survey is also closely involved in international studies like the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), allowing researchers and analysts to examine UK views in the context of those held in a wide range of other countries.

## How have we changed?

The UK has changed considerably since the mid 1980s. Then, we still had a significant manufacturing sector and a working-class who believed strongly in traditional 'left-wing' policies. Now, while a significant number of people still define themselves in terms of class, it's less useful as a predictor of beliefs or political affiliations. Political issues continue to divide us, but we can't rely so much on traditional indicators to predict which side of the debate someone will be on.

Attitudes to policy priorities have changed as well (though then, as now, education and health top the list when people are asked to nominate an area they would like to see attract more government spending). In particular, our feelings about welfare, and welfare recipients, are very different now to how they were back in the 1980s. Take unemployment benefits: in 1983, 46% of people thought these benefit levels were 'too low and cause hardship'; this had almost halved to 26% by 2007. In contrast, while in 1983, 35% thought benefit levels were 'too high and discourage job finding' by 2007 54% took this view. These changes partly reflect the fact that unemployment has become less of an issue over the last two decades (though this of course is already changing). But they also probably reflect the changing messages about benefit levels which have been sent out by political parties (and particularly the Labour party) over the last decade.

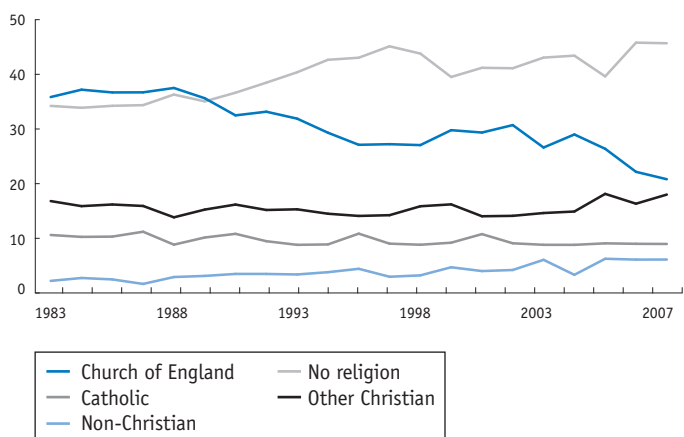
## Attitudes to levels of unemployment benefits



Some of the biggest changes we have seen relate to moral and social issues. In 1983, we were much more critical of pre-marital or gay or lesbian relationships than we are now. Then, 28% thought sex before marriage was 'always' or 'mostly' wrong, and 62% thought sexual relations between adults of the same sex were wrong. Now only 11% think pre-marital sex is wrong, while just over a third (36%) think this of gay or lesbian relationships. Our views on abortion have also shifted markedly. In 1983, 37% agreed that a woman who decides on her own that she does not want a child should be allowed to have an abortion; now 60% take this view.

Of course, religious identity helps shape views on these sorts of topics. Over the last few decades, church pews have been emptying and there's been a huge rise in those describing themselves as being of 'no religion'. They haven't come from the ranks of the other Christian denominations or from other faiths – the rise of those without a faith and the erosion of Anglicanism almost exactly mirror each other. In every other denomination or religion, there's been negligible movement in either direction.

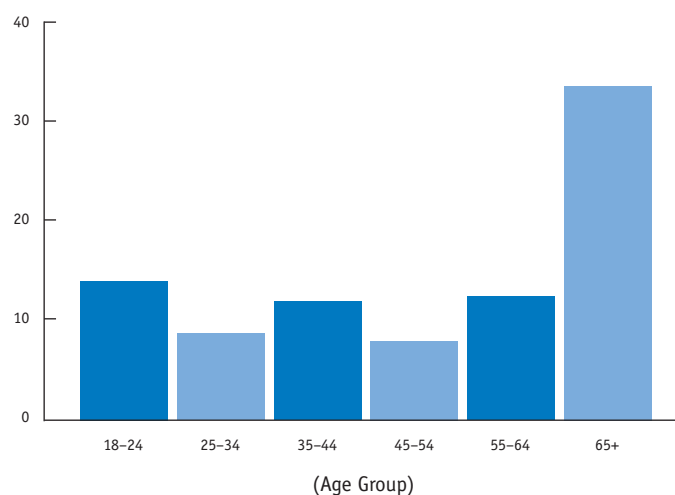
## Religious belonging



While 'class' now tells us far less than it did, age and education still matter. In particular, graduates have very distinctive views. They're more liberal than other groups about issues such as homosexuality and pre-marital sex, and are also more politically interested and engaged. Almost half of graduates (49%) say they have a great deal or quite a lot of interest in politics compared to a quarter of non-graduates.

Huge generation gaps on many issues persist. In some cases, the most conservative generations are quite literally dying off, but that doesn't mean we're becoming totally homogenous in our attitudes; young and old remain very divided over things like cohabitation and gender roles. For example, 33% of people aged 65 and over agree with traditional gender role assertions such as the idea that a 'man's job' is to work while a 'woman's job' is to look after the home and family (although 35% disagree). Among 25-34 year olds, just 9% agree while 72% disagree.

## Gender roles by age – % agree a man's job is to earn money, a woman's job is to look after the home and family



These are just a few of the issues which have been tracked by the British Social Attitudes survey over the last three decades. Year after year, we like to think it helps challenge our assumptions (or perhaps, more importantly, the assumptions made by those in positions of power and influence) about what the public think. Often, in place of a 'moral majority', we find that the 'public' holds a diverse but often carefully considered set of opinions. As a society, our thoughts on complex issues are rich and nuanced. If we assume otherwise, we're underestimating ourselves.

**British Social Attitudes: the 25th Report, published by SAGE, is out now. NatCen: [www.natcen.ac.uk](http://www.natcen.ac.uk)**

# Tensions between data sharing and data protection in research with people

By *Veerle Van den Eynden* and *Louise Corti*, UK Data Archive

As the designated national centre for preservation and dissemination of research data arising from ESRC-funded research, with expertise in quantitative and qualitative social science data, the UK Data Archive (UKDA) is concerned about the number of research projects undertaken where consent agreements between researchers and research participants precludes any sharing of research data beyond the original research. Many researchers fail to take into account the potential longer-term use of their data by the wider research community when obtaining consent, and draw up agreements prohibiting data sharing. Examples range from consent forms or verbal agreements saying that the research data will only be seen and used by the principal investigator, to clauses stating that raw data will be destroyed upon project completion. In doing so, researchers restrict the wider use of research data and their preservation in digital archives like the UKDA, when there is no ethical or legal need to do so.

On one side, research funders such as ESRC, MRC, the British Academy, the Wellcome Trust and others increasingly require or encourage research data to be shared beyond the primary research. MRC and ESRC specifically advise researchers to take sharing and re-use of data into consideration when obtaining consent.

On the other side, researchers are bound by legislation like the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA) and ethical duties towards participants. Research ethics committees, as

custodians of ethical standards in research and the safety and rights of participants, place a strong emphasis on data protection and the ethical use of data, and may well steer researchers away from data sharing.

At first sight, it may seem difficult to reconcile protecting the rights of participants, honouring a duty of confidentiality and obeying the DPA, with sharing research data, especially for sensitive or confidential research topics. Whilst the need to protect personal data and to honour confidentiality where this is explicitly required cannot be ignored, this does not mean that research data cannot be shared. The DPA principles apply to personal data, and should not be applied to all research data obtained from participants. Sensitive and confidential data can be shared ethically if researchers pay attention, from the planning stages of research, to three key aspects:

1. Obtaining informed consent for data sharing, besides consent for participation and other data uses
  2. Protecting people's identities when needed, by anonymising research data
  3. Deciding if access restrictions to all or part of the data may be needed
- These measures should always be considered jointly – not in isolation – and discussed openly with participants.

Researchers and research ethics committees should inform themselves about these measures to enable ethical data sharing. Whilst the latter provide good guidance on data protection, they

should equally guide researchers on ethical sharing of research data and how to address this in consent discussions. Researchers themselves should ensure that consent agreements address the long-term use of research data and develop anonymisation and data access strategies where needed.

The UKDA is as concerned as research ethics committees and researchers are about research ethics, protecting participants and safeguarding personal data. UKDA takes its duty very seriously to make sure that archived materials are used only in appropriate and ethical ways. Archived data are anonymised where needed and data users do not have access to personal data. Archiving does not mean placing data in the public domain. The UKDA uses licences to control access to data and to make sure that only people who agree to use data ethically have access to them. Whilst most data are generally available for research and education purposes, with registered users required to sign an end use licence which details how the data can and cannot be used, confidential data may be further restricted, requiring special permission from the data creator prior to release, or being under embargo for a certain period.

If researchers, research ethics committees and data archives work together in dialogue, data sharing can be increased for the benefit of researchers and participants alike.

Detailed guidance on how research data can be shared ethically, how to

*Continued on page 15*

# Children's Workforce Development Council

*Mary Baginsky, Head of Research, describes the council's work*

Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) was set up in 2005 to support the implementation of Every Child Matters. The council has two roles. It is a Sector Skills Council body and workforce reform agency. As part of Skills for Care and Development, CWDC has to address the skill needs of those in its footprint. As a workforce reform agency, CWDC contributes to and coordinates the Children's Workforce Network (CWN). CWDC's work supports over half a million people in the children's workforce across England, including those in childcare provision, learning mentors, education welfare, foster care and social care. There are other people who work with children but who are not covered by our remit, such as teachers and health service professionals. CWDC works closely with colleagues in the Children's Workforce Network (CWN) to address common issues across the whole of the children's workforce and to find answers to common challenges. The complexity and breadth of the role means that its research strategy is both exciting and challenging.

Despite the fact that CWDC is a very young organisation, it has supported a wide-ranging programme of research and evaluation over the past few years. All of it has been policy and practice related and designed to meet the vision of a world-class workforce for children, young people and families. There are four main areas of work. One involves large scale evaluations of initiatives which have

been introduced into an area which falls within our footprint. These projects are usually commissioned. An example is the evaluation of the Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs) programme (2008 -2011). In the first year the programme has supported 1,000 NQSWs in 85 local authorities. A support package has been designed to ensure that NQSWs receive consistent, high quality support and that those supervising NQSWs are confident in their skills to provide support. The evaluation is being conducted by the universities of Salford, Bristol and King's College London. In another social work project, eleven local authorities have been supported to establish pilot projects to create new ways of organising working practices, to allow social workers to spend more time with children and families. In this case, a national data exercise is being conducted by Price Waterhouse Coopers while CWDC's researchers are conducting the evaluation of the individual pilots.

A second area is that of practitioner-led research. This will be the fourth year where those working within CWDC's footprint have been encouraged to suggest an area which they would like to research. Their proposals are assessed and those who are successful receive a small award to support this work. Over the years, the form of support which they receive has evolved, and this year, over 60 practitioners have been supported by Making Research Count partners across the country. The researchers have had the opportunity to describe their projects and discuss their findings at regional and national events,

and details of these projects are available on CWDC's website.

A third area is made up of a wide range of smaller projects, most of which have been externally commissioned. All are designed to meet CWDC's strategic priorities as well as make sure that policy and practice are informed by research findings and evidence drawn from across the spectrum of relevant work. Amongst this year's projects have been studies of the implementation of team around the child model, the development of an economic framework for assessing investment in skills development for people who work in the children's workforce, and of the involvement of volunteers in the children's workforce.

In addition to these three areas the research team contributes to improved intelligence on the children and young people's workforce based on an increase in the availability of accurate, relevant and comparable data. Improved workforce intelligence has been highlighted in CWDC's Sector Skills Agreement as one of five key priorities. The provision of high quality labour market and occupational information is a key responsibility for CWDC as a sector skills council body. It also informs and supports much of the work CWDC undertakes as a workforce reform organisation. Projects have been commissioned to review the available data on the size and characteristics of the children and young people's workforce. These include the publication of detailed summaries of each of CWDC's footprint occupations as well as a report on the state of the children's social care workforce. Future work will include similar reports on the youth workforce, the early years and childcare sector as well as the children's workforce as a whole.

**More information:** [www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/research/projects/current](http://www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/research/projects/current)

## Health, Risk and Vulnerability

Alan Petersen and Iain Wilkinson (eds)  
Routledge, 2008  
ISBN: 0-415-38308-0 (pbk)

*Reviewed by Mabel Lie, Institute of Health and Society, Newcastle University*

This edited volume is a valuable contribution to the growing debates in the literature on risk, a key feature of present day modernity. The papers presented cover a wide range of areas that include medicalization, governance, risk management, and more specifically, ante-natal testing, sexual behaviour, mental health issues and vaccination, within which the issues of risk and vulnerability are examined. This collection of essays is, however, dominated by its British context. Rather than the promise of 'international contributors' indicated in the synopsis, there are only two non-British contributors while the rest are from UK universities (mainly City University and Kent University). Nevertheless, the subjects covered will prove highly relevant to anyone interested in how discourses on health risk structure contemporary society. This collection will have something to offer whether the reader is an academic, researcher or policy-maker.

As someone relatively new to the sociology of health risk, I appreciated the breadth of research presented and the theoretical frameworks employed for analysis. The work of Deborah Lupton was referred to in many of the chapters and I thought it would have been useful to have had more



of a discussion of her theorisation on risk in the introductory chapter. In terms of research methods, there were fascinating insights to be gleaned but most particularly in the two chapters where an internet discussion forum and a chat-room were used as fieldwork sites. The ethical issues of such methods were carefully discussed and will prove useful to researchers interested in this relatively new and developing area.

In putting together this collection, the editors have succeeded in their aim of highlighting the socio-cultural and political significance of risk in health and healthcare, as well as the vulnerabilities which social agents face as a consequence.

## Understanding inequality, poverty and wealth: policies and prospects

Tess Ridge and Sharon Wright (Eds)  
Policy Press, Bristol, 2008

*Reviewed by Nicola Lloyd, Director for Analysis, Commission for Rural Communities*

This comprehensive primer begins its introduction with Tawney's view: "What thoughtful rich people call the problem of poverty, thoughtful poor people call with equal justice the problem of riches."

This quote sets the scene for an extensive and in-depth examination of poverty and social exclusion, wealth and inequality, which is designed primarily for students as an introduction to this field of socio-economic study. Throughout the book, the many contributors give clear explanations of the main concepts and discussion points with selected references (i.e. not too many!), sources of any data used and key policy documents. There are also

questions for discussion at the end of each chapter to encourage students to explore each topic further.

The book covers many issues in four sections – key concepts and issues; people and place: divisions of poverty and wealth; the role of the state; and prospects. The range of aspects is impressive, ranging from chapters on specific groups which may be vulnerable to poverty including ethnic minority groups, children and young people and older people to an overview of global inequalities. However, it is disappointing that the focus of the spatial analysis is urban, so that the existence of rural poverty and disadvantage and its particular policy implications is not acknowledged.

Each chapter could stand alone in its structure and level of explanation and, although the style remains consistent (which is an editorial achievement in a book with sixteen different authors), there is some necessary repetition which means that this is not a book to read from cover to cover. However, there are some fascinating insights throughout, which merit taking time with the book, for both readers new to this field and others who wish to develop different ways of understanding this fundamental aspect of twenty-first century society.

## Youth Culture in Modern Britain, c.1920–c.1970

David Fowler  
2008, Palgrave Macmillan

*Reviewed by Alex Duckett, Consultant, TNS Social*

David Fowler's book seeks to trace the origins of British youth culture beyond the mythical view of a beginning which stemmed from the Beatles and teenage cultures of the

1950s and 1960s. The role of individuals, social class, institutions and ideas are all explored through a series of in-depth examples of distinct cultural movements.

The structure of the book takes a chronological approach, with each chapter very unique in terms of its focus. Chapters include an examination of Edwardian cults of youth around the twentieth century, the role of Rolf Gardiner and the Flapper cult in inter-war Britain, through to the pop cultures of Beatlemania and the Rolling Stones.

The book uses original archive research of great value for scholars of cultural history and sociology, but the wide ranging scope and readable nature also make it accessible for the general reader. This book is particularly successful in its ability to place in an appropriate historical context, the influence upon youth of trends amongst the media and consumerism.

The reader is left with a convincing impression that twentieth century youth cultures were created through interactions within distinct communities, as opposed to a niche achievement of a homogenous mass culture. Challenges are also made to a number of orthodox interpretations, such as the 'classless' nature of 1960s youth culture.

However, there is little in the way of consistent narrative or focus running throughout the book, the effect being that it is difficult to be persuaded on some of the more general premises. Once the beginnings of youth culture are successfully challenged, it appears less convincing that we should begin our focus in the 1920s for example. But to seek to draw too many generalist conclusions from a concise book such as this would be a mistake. Rather, a principal strength should be seen as its ability to reveal an eclectic collection of insights throughout every chapter.

## ITEMS FOR REVIEW

If you would like a copy of any of the following books, simply write a short review of about 300 words. In exchange, you get to keep the item. [Contact Annie Irvine, book review editor: aj513@york.ac.uk](mailto:aj513@york.ac.uk)

**Towards a more equal society? Poverty, inequality and policy since 1997** Edited by John Hills, Tom Sefton and Kitty Stewart (2009, Policy Press)

**Well-being of Older People in Ageing Societies** Asghar Zaidi (2008, Ashgate)

**Research Methods for Everyday Life: Blending Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches** Scott W. VanderStoep and Deirdre D. Johnston (2009, Jossey-Bass)

**Internet, Mail, and Mixed-Mode Surveys: The Tailored Design Method, 3rd Edition** Don A. Dillman, Jolene D. Smyth, Leah Melani Christian (2009, Wiley & Sons)

## Continued from page 12

address data sharing in consent and how to anonymise qualitative and quantitative research data, as well as information on training workshops on these topics is available on the UKDA website at: [www.data-archive.ac.uk/sharing/confidential.asp](http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/sharing/confidential.asp). A shortened brochure on data management and sharing is available at: [www.data-archive.ac.uk/news/publications/managingsharing.pdf](http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/news/publications/managingsharing.pdf)

Advice on this topic can be provided by UKDA staff members Louise Corti, Libby Bishop and Veerle Van den Eynden via [datasharing@essex.ac.uk](mailto:datasharing@essex.ac.uk).

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This seems to be somewhat of a grey area, but IES is deemed by HMRC not to be an eligible body, because, although a charity, it is also engaged in other activities (e.g. consultancy and a membership programme) which are not research. Given also that some of any surplus generated by a research project is ploughed back, not only into research and training activities (acceptable for VAT exemption purposes), but also into other activities of the institute, not falling into this exempt category, it is deemed that all of its activities are VATable, despite its charitable status.

Second, there is an issue of competitive equity among research organisations with different VAT status – e.g. an exempt charity/university vs a non-exempt charity (such as IES) vs a private research organisation. While VAT status should arguably make no difference, because the purchaser can reclaim VAT paid, in practice, different budget lines may be involved, with the research commissioned from one budget, and VAT reclaimed under another budget line.

From the perspective of the commissioning department, therefore, with a fixed research budget, there may, in practice, be a price advantage in commissioning a VAT-exempt supplier. Indeed, some public sector commissioners make it clear in tendering research projects that the fixed budget must include VAT if charged; hence organisations which charge VAT must have a lower effective price to compete with organisations which do not.

It would be interesting to hear from readers who have themselves come across these, or similar issues, as a problem and better still to learn of approaches to counteract the seeming inequality this creates.

Further information: [j.n.bilsborough@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:j.n.bilsborough@lboro.ac.uk)

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Survey research & data privacy:  
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