

Joint CCT and SAB response to the ESS Review Panel recommendations

February 2009

Introduction

The CCT and SAB are grateful to the Review Panel for a thorough and detailed Review of the ESS, which provides a helpful basis for improvement and renewal.

This document is a joint response from the two committees to the recommendations, following discussions at their respective meetings.

Having been set up by the ESS's funders, the Review Panel conducted a thorough investigation and made 22 recommendations, a response to each of which is provided in Part 2 of this document. Their recommendations fall into five broad categories:

- One overall conclusion about the future of the ESS and its scope (No.1)
- Four recommendations on governance and organisation (No's. 14, 15, 16, 17)
- Six recommendations on operational issues (No's 3, 9, 12, 13, 20, 22)
- Five recommendations on methodology (No's 4, 5, 6, 7, 8)
- Six recommendations on outreach and dissemination (No's 2, 10, 11, 18, 19, 21)

Part 1 below contains a summary of our collective responses¹ within each of the above categories.

Part 1: Summary of responses by category

We greatly welcome the recommendations contained within each of the five categories above. Some are inevitably more controversial than others, and some will clearly defy swift implementation. But we understand and appreciate the reasons behind each recommendation and are delighted by the Panel's overall support for the ESS. Indeed, we agree unreservedly with all but three of the 22 recommendations. As noted, our specific responses to each recommendation are in Part 2.

a) *Overall conclusions*

The unanimous conclusion of the Panel is contained in its **Recommendation No. 1**, which underlines the importance of the ESS, its growing success and its wide impact on survey methods and substance in Europe and beyond. These factors prompted the Panel to recommend that the project's funders provide "fully continuous funding at levels necessary to achieve its vision and maintain its quality".

The CCT and SAB, many members of which have been associated with the ESS since the outset, were gratified by such a positive endorsement from the Panel and will

¹ The final implementation of some recommendations will need to await decisions about the future structure and funding arrangements of the ESS, which cannot be finalised until a decision is made about whether and on what scale the ESS is to become a European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC).

continue to press the case for a more secure longer-term funding mechanism that is necessary for planning a long-term time series of this nature.

In the light of this recommendation, the ESF has since called on all existing national funders to make an early commitment to the support of ESS Rounds 5 (2009 – 2010) and 6 (2011 – 2012), after which it is hoped that the ESS's future will be secured through longer-term 'infrastructure' funding via a combination of EC and national funding. In response to this request, sixteen national research councils/ministries to date have signed a 'statement of commitment' promising in the first instance continued finance at a national level for the four years from mid-2009 to mid-2012.

During this period, we are setting up mechanisms to ensure the continuation and expansion of outreach and quality enhancement measures that will help to ensure that the ESS is prepared for a transition to a European Research Infrastructure.

b) Governance and organisation

The four recommendations on governance and organisation (No's. **14, 15, 16 and 17**) call for greater institutionalisation and formalisation of the CCT and SAB and for greater diversity of membership of both the Methods Group and Question Module Design Teams. All four recommendations are welcome and are already being acted on.

In particular, the ESS Infrastructure Preparatory Phase involves the creation of a legally-based entity and a set of statutes for its governance. Thus, more formality than hitherto has become not only desirable but also *de rigueur*. As part of these new governance arrangements (and for the most part preceding their implementation), we will attempt to strengthen the membership and role of the Methods group and to widen the scope of the Question Module Design Teams. The financial impact of such developments will be incorporated into the revision of the ESS blueprint which is also well under way.

c) Operational issues

Six recommendations on operational issues were made (No's. **3, 9, 12, 13, 20 and 22**). These include three detailed recommendations on rotating modules all of which are warmly received. In response, we have brought forward the Call for Question Module Design Teams for R5 and have included in the Call the obligation of successful teams to publish their findings with due despatch. We have also taken steps to broaden the disciplinary representation on the QDT referee panel, but have not taken forward the idea of specifically including editors of relevant journals on the panel. Meanwhile, the SAB and CCT have considered a replication strategy for rotating modules and have for the first time specifically invited applications for replications in Round 5.

Two other recommendations in this category were about keeping appropriately abreast of external substantive and methodological developments in relevant disciplines, as well as conducting experiments on alternatives to face-to-face interviewing within or between certain participating countries. The CCT continues to follow both of these paths and is already well-advanced in a series of methodological experiments into alternative modes of data collection.

Following discussions within the CCT and the SAB, we do not, however, regard it as cost-effective at this stage to accept the recommendation to make the existing ESS website multilingual (apart from those elements that are already multilingual). Instead, we will, however, encourage national teams to set up websites that contain translations of more key ESS documents.

d) Methodological issues

The fourth set of helpful recommendations on methodological issues (No's. **4, 5, 6, 7, 8**) were made in the context of the Panel's overall endorsement of the ESS's existing methodological standards and its rigorous sampling procedures. The panel nonetheless encouraged the CCT to go further by developing a 'quality framework' which covers all aspects of measurement and deploys quantitative quality indicators. These recommendations are already being worked on as part of the RI Preparatory Phase.

In line with the Panel's emphasis on providing easily accessible contextual data, we will continue to use funds from the Descartes Prize to pursue such work. Similarly, our work on response rates and nonresponse bias continues and will be documented in a book currently being co-authored by four members of the CCT, again with the aid of funds from the Descartes prize. The results of all this work will also find their way into the revised Blueprint being developed as part of the RI Preparatory Phase.

e) Outreach and dissemination

A further six recommendations (No's. **2, 10, 11, 18, 19 and 21**) referred to the imperative to promote wider awareness of the ESS and its findings. We strongly endorse these recommendations and are already attempting to develop a clearer strategy for outreach to both academic and policy communities in line with the recommended strategies. Expansion of ESS training courses and workshops is also our goal (funds permitting) and is being built into the revised ESS Blueprint with relevant costs.

Once again we greatly appreciate the Review Panel's report and are actively trying to implement most of its conclusions without delay. Some of the recommendations are already in place, while others await extra funds and will have to be addressed in the context of our proposals for a future Research infrastructure. But we believe that the recommendations of the Review Panel substantially strengthen the case for continuing and strengthening the ESS as an important component of the European Research Area, servicing both social science and European governance.

Part 2: Detailed responses to each recommendation

Recommendation 1: "The panel unanimously finds that the importance of ESS, its demonstrated success in initial launch, and its clear signals of impact justify fully continuous funding at levels necessary to achieve its vision and maintain its quality".

CCT response

We are greatly encouraged by the Review Panel's endorsement of the ESS and hope that its funders – at both a national level and in the EC – will commit themselves to the ESS's longer-term funding horizon with the enhanced support that the Panel recommends. In the short-term, we call on even more of our existing funders to make an early commitment to the support of ESS Round 5 (2009 – 2010) and Round 6 (2011 – 2012), after which the selection of longer-term European Research Infrastructures will be made and the ESS's longer-term future will, we hope, be secured.

Recommendation 2: “ESS should consider more outreach to intellectual communities that could benefit from ESS data but which are not yet part of the ESS network. These include, for example, behavioural and labour economists, researchers in social environment and health, scholars in communications, international relations, geography, and women’s studies”.

CCT response

We accept readily that still greater outreach is desirable in order to increase the amount and quality of ESS usage. We have therefore already renewed our efforts to expand existing networks – for instance by increasing the reach of the advertising for Round 5 Question Design Teams (QDTs) and by initiating new contacts within academic and policy communities that have not hitherto been among the ESS’s most attentive audiences. We regard greater outreach as one of our key objectives in the coming years.

Recommendation 3: “The researchers proposing chosen question modules should be required to make a scientific presentation at an SAB meeting within two years of the release of the round’s data. This presentation ought to have the format of an article submitted to a peer-reviewed journal, a book-length monograph, or equivalent publications”.

CCT response

We wholly endorse this recommendation and are introducing it for the present Round 4 QDTs, as well as including it as an explicit requirement for QDTs from Round 5 onwards.

Recommendation 4: “ESS should enrich the contextual data available to users (e.g., adding neighbourhood characteristics through interviewer observation, statistical office data for spatial units, country-level aggregate data), even if this reduces the amount of resources available for the event data”.

CCT response

Significant progress is already being made on facilitating greater direct access to relevant contextual data. Funding for this has been set aside from the Descartes Prize award, as well as from earmarked resources within both ESSi and ESSPrep. Part of the ESSi grant also supports the development of a new methodology for collecting and coding events which will significantly enhance their comparability across countries.

Recommendation 5: “ESS is the only European-wide survey based on comparable probability samples. The asset is a necessary condition for measurable survey quality. Data collection in future rounds should also be based on probability samples”.

CCT response

We welcome this conclusion and agree that the ESS’s unusual levels of rigour and equivalence are attributable to its high standards of sampling and associated methodological protocols.

Recommendation 6: “ESS should develop a quality framework for all components of measurement. The framework would guide the expansion of quantitative indicators of field data collection performance made available to ESS users”.

CCT response

We are pursuing this aim as part of the ESSPrep work by forming an upgrade planning group whose task it is to develop a more explicit quality framework for ESS operations than exists at present. In particular, the crucial role of the interviewer in the quality framework will be recognised more explicitly.

Recommendation 7: “ESS has produced quantitative data on response rates, indicators of non-response bias, and estimates of validity and reliability on some items. However, survey estimates have other dimensions of quality (e.g., coverage of the target population, sampling variance, and other measurement errors). More such quantitative indicators would help ESS users”.

CCT response

We are already working on some elements of this proposal, such as sampling variance and will attempt to obtain and make available better-defined measures of sample coverage. Many further possible indicators depend largely on available resources and will thus be considered in the context of the revised Blueprint now in preparation.

Recommendation 8: “ESS should increase studies of non-response bias, given the increasing risks posed by falling response rates”.

CCT response

As part of the ESSi grant there is already a programme of work on non-response bias - the results of which are due to be published soon. In addition, a book on mitigating non-response in cross-national surveys, authored by members of the CCT, partially funded by some of the Descartes prize money, will be published in 2009 or 2010.

We also intend to pursue the objectives of this recommendation in the revised Blueprint, taking account of the fact that - if mixed mode data collection is at some point to be adopted in certain participating nations - further work on differential non-response bias will become essential.

Recommendation 9: “Creating a multilingual web site for NESTAR and ESS data should be hastened because it is an important tool to widen the user base. The ESS website should be transformed into a multilingual site as soon as possible”.

CCT response

We clearly see the advantages of having information about the ESS available in many languages. Indeed, documentation in multiple languages is, and always has been, available on the ESS data website. This includes the availability on the ESS data website the original questionnaires and show cards in some 25 languages. (We are uncertain as to whether the Review Panel was aware of this.) In any case, we are now investigating with ESS National Coordinators the possibility of creating their own ESS websites with key information and documentation and with links to the other ESS websites. We are also investigating the possibility of using a common template for all these websites.

But we question how practical or cost-effective it would be to translate and update the whole of the ESS home and data websites into multiple languages. While a one-off translation might just be feasible, the high extra costs of *continually updating* such a high volume of ever-changing documents, protocols and data sets would, we believe, be prohibitive. If so, it might well take its toll on the volume of material routinely lodged on the website. The fact is that updates to the web pages and the material they contain take place almost daily, and the labour costs of replicating these tasks in around 25 different ESS languages would be considerable. We therefore propose to proceed with caution and to confine ourselves pro tem to the more limited objectives identified above.

Recommendation 10: “The ties between researchers in different parts of Europe might be deepened by a number of ESS activities for instance by expanding the training courses, both for methodological topics and for social theory topics”.

CCT response

Our existing courses funded via the ESSi grant are indeed heavily oversubscribed and we are equally keen to expand them. This naturally depends on available resources, so we will propose to increase the range, volume (and funding) of such courses in the revised Blueprint, precisely along the lines suggested.

Recommendation 11: “The funding of ESS should contain incentives to encourage analysis and publication using ESS data (e.g., analysis grants by research councils, prizes for best paper from ESS, an ESS working paper series, an annual volume of best articles using ESS, workshops on analyzing data, commitment of module authors to write a report on modules, fellowships supporting ESS analysis by PhD students, post-docs for ESS analysis programs, the costs of translation to English), all in an attempt to widen the user base and scientific output of ESS”.

CCT response

We endorse this recommendation, welcome the range of outreach activities proposed, and will willingly include such activities in the revised Blueprint. Some of the individual suggestions - such as a ‘best ESS articles volume’, analysis workshops, and more stringent requirements from module design teams – clearly fall within the direct remit of

the CCT. Others – such as working paper series, analysis grants, fellowships, post-docs, and translation grants – may be more fruitfully pursued at a national institutional level. Either way, it will be up to the CCT not only to find resources for some activities from the central grant and elsewhere, but also to encourage and facilitate arrangements for greater research and publishing activity based on ESS data at both a regional and national level. In implementing the range of outreach activities proposed, we will also involve a wider constituency of individuals and teams than are currently part of the CCT.

Recommendation 12: “ESS should issue a call for module proposals through relevant media with enough lead time for scientists to assemble the multi-country, multidisciplinary team, even if the call must be labelled as “contingent on availability of funding”.

CCT response

This proposal too has already been adopted and is being implemented in the Round 5 Call for Proposals for QDTs. In later rounds we intend to launch the Call at an even earlier point in time.

Recommendation 13: “ESS should choose rotating modules through a joint scientific panel widely representative of all the social sciences; for example, the editors of the major European journals, representatives from the European associations in the social sciences, and SAB members”.

CCT response

We intend to expand the disciplinary base of the module selection advisory subgroup along the lines proposed and have already done so in a limited way for Round 5. However we are not convinced of the case for recruiting journal editors *ex officio* (who might be especially favourable to applications within their journal’s primary field) and prefer instead to rely for the most part on active researchers. We are also not sure whether the Review Panel appreciated that the last subgroup covered the disciplines of psychology, sociology, political science and social statistics, and that previous rounds have had a similar spread. Nonetheless, without unduly expanding the subgroup, we see the wisdom for some rotation of disciplines from round to round.

Recommendation 14: “The methods group should be expanded to include scholars with expertise in use of contextual and spatial data, analysis of multi-country data, and diverse statistical analysis appropriate to complex survey data”.

CCT response

This recommendation will be put to the next meeting of the Methods Group where expansion of the group’s membership and roles will be considered in detail. We will also consult other specialists before deciding to what extent and into what fields the Group should expand.

Recommendation 15: “The Methods group should prepare an annual report to the ESF, describing the quality of methods development in the survey”.

CCT response

The Methods Group is at present an unpaid group of external specialists from different corners of the globe and it would not, we believe, be appropriate to demand from them an annual report. In one respect the minutes of their meetings serve that purpose. We will, however, consider building into future budgets some modest funding for the Methods Group above and beyond their travel and subsistence for meetings.

Recommendation 16: “The ESF should encourage the full institutionalisation of the SAB, with appointment procedures, explicit terms, and rotation of roles. The SAB should create the role of vice-chair, with a fixed term, to promote the development of expanded leadership capacity within the SAB”.

CCT response

The SAB and CCT both support this recommendation and will incorporate procedures into the new governance structure now under construction. The existing ESS structural arrangements document will be built into the new arrangements.

Recommendation 17: “The CCT should similarly create institutional features to assure long-term strength; the CCT should appoint a formal deputy director”.

CCT response

Both bodies endorse this recommendation too and it will in turn form part of the ESS’s new governance structure.

Recommendation 18: “ESS needs to monitor emerging themes in key European societies, new conceptual frameworks, and cutting-edge new theories, and evaluate their import into the ESS measurement”.

CCT response

We will continue pursuing this objective not only by adding to and reinforcing the ESS core questionnaire to reflect emerging issues (as we did in Round 3 with new questions on perceptions of crime and terrorism), but also by an explicit policy to attract rotating modules with cutting edge themes in relation to European policy or developments in social science. Innovative work of this kind is now one of the explicit criteria for judging applications for new module design teams.

Recommendation 19: “In its new infrastructure status, ESS should have funds for an active public outreach function, coordinating with the similar functions of the national research councils. This function will seek to make the discoveries relevant to school children, social and community organisations, and other important components of the societies”.

CCT response

We warmly welcome this recommendation and will include such activities in the revised Blueprint, seeking partners from outside our own ranks to help us pursue these activities. In order to plan this work an ESS Upgrade planning group has been convened to specify and cost such activities.

Recommendation 20: “ESS needs to articulate a future vision that addresses a) the growing demand to add questions and question modules, and to replicate modules, b) the long-term decline in survey response rates, c) the promise of alternative modes of data collection, including the internet, d) the increasing diversity of European populations, and e) the change in meaning of words over time (and the consequent need for orderly transition in the core questions)”.

CCT response

We agree fully with these recommendations. Issues of module replication have now been discussed by the SAB which has the final say on new modules. As a result, the Round 5 Call for the first time explicitly invited applications for repetitions of earlier modules. There would not for the time being be separate competitions for new and repeat modules. Instead, all applications would compete with one another in Round 5.

Although there has been a period of declining response rates in Europe, ESS experience suggests that this trend can in some countries be arrested or reversed. As noted, work on response rates and non-response bias is already a major part of our present remit, and we hope to be in a position by 2011 to decide whether and when modes of data collection other than face to face interviewing should be permitted and under what circumstances. These decisions will be incorporated into the revised Blueprint.

Issues of equivalence between the meaning of questions over time and place have always been high on the ESS’s agenda and will continue to be so. A programme of work on question reliability and validity cross-nationally forms a work package in one of our present grants and will also be an important part of the Blueprint agenda.

Recommendation 21: “ESF should work with ESS to expand the impact of ESS on European social science, through sponsoring workshops with national coordinators on sharing advanced survey methods, on how to analyze the cross-national data. These should target both graduate students and university faculty, but also journalists, market researchers, and government analysts”.

CCT response

We welcome this recommendation and are initiating discussions with the ESF on ways to implement it. Meanwhile, we continue to appreciate the long term support that the ESF has already provided to the ESS.

Recommendation 22: ESS must be funded to permit active reinventing of its measurement approaches to maintain cost efficiency.

CCT response

Many of the previous recommendations feed directly into this one. We will continue to work closely with the SAB and the Methods Group, as well as with other quantitative social scientists throughout Europe and beyond to open up our methods and procedures to a wider range of influences and approaches.

Central Coordinating Team and Scientific Advisory Board, ESS, November 2008