

SPECIFICATION FOR METHODS FOR COMPARATIVE CROSS-NATIONAL RESEARCH: AN ESRC INITIATIVE

1 Background

- 1.1. Comparative research has been broadly applied by the research community for at least 60 years.¹ With the expanding tendencies of globalisation and interdependency that mark the current international system, an increased value is being placed on comparisons across different national systems and cultures, on making global connections, as well as policy learning and, policy diffusion.

- 1.2. Much of what social scientists do is comparative in nature either in terms of variables such as class, gender, and ethnicity or in terms of time trends. Comparative cross-national research is increasingly taking a variety of forms. It includes variable and case oriented strategies. It covers comparisons of political and social institutions (welfare systems and services, legal systems, electoral systems, organisations, families), political attitudes, values and beliefs, and individuals' biographies. International surveys include, but are not limited to, Programme for International Student Assessment², International Social Survey Programme³, Comparative Study of Electoral Systems⁴, Eurobarometer surveys⁵ and European Social Survey.⁶ In addition, there are a number of national studies that have been developed in parallel to explicitly allow for comparative cross-national research, such as the panel studies of ageing (for example, English Longitudinal Study of Ageing⁷, SHARE⁸ and Health and Retirement Survey⁹) and household panels (PSID in the USA¹⁰, BHPS in the UK¹¹, GSEOP in Germany¹²). The assumption is that comparing across national systems and cultures provides additional leverage on important research questions relative to single-nation studies and, thereby, enhances knowledge and the quality of policy making. The heightened focus on cross-national comparison has been matched by a growth in research funding at the European Union level. This has profoundly expanded the scope for high quality and ambitious cross-

¹ See Tabular History of Comparative Survey Research, <http://www.gesis.org/en/services/data/portals-links/comparative-survey-projects/>

² For more details on Organisation's for Economic Co-operation and Development Programme for International Student Assessment see http://www.pisa.oecd.org/pages/0,2987,en_32252351_32235731_1_1_1_1_1,00.html

³ For more details on International Social Survey Programme see <http://www.issp.org/>

⁴ For more details on Comparative Study of Electoral Systems see <http://www.umich.edu/~cses/>

⁵ For more details on Eurobarometer surveys see http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm

⁶ For more details on European Social Survey see <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>

⁷ For more details on English Longitudinal Study of Ageing see <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/elsa/>

⁸ For more details on Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe see <http://www.share-project.org/>

⁹ For more details on Health and Retirement Study see <http://hrsonline.isr.umich.edu/>

¹⁰ For more details on Panel Study of Income Dynamics see <http://psidonline.isr.umich.edu/>

¹¹ For more details on British Household Panel Survey see <http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/survey/bhps>

¹² For more details on The German Socio-Economic Panel Study see <http://www.diw.de/deutsch/soep/29012.html>

national research activity and enabled European researchers to work together, especially through the European Commission's Framework Funding budget.

- 1.3. Comparing political, economic, cultural and institutional contexts across national boundaries presents specific challenges regarding measurement and the cultural specificity of concepts. For example, differences in language, income distributions, education systems (e.g. average length of education and type of qualifications) retirement ages, pension and health systems all raise challenges of equivalence and comparability for social scientists. Viewed operationally, these differences relate to different levels: national level, meso level (e.g. schools, workplaces) and micro level of individuals and households. The challenge is to be able to take account of national differences in current and historical contexts and the cultural and social meaning of the phenomena studied.
- 1.4. Additional methodological challenges emerge from recent developments, including both the potential to cover a growing number of countries in comparative cross-national research, which translates into increased size and complexity of international teams, and the importance currently placed upon multi-disciplinary social science research and the collection and integration of different types of data within many comparative cross-national studies.
- 1.5. The above factors are compounded by differences in theoretical and methodological traditions across countries. A degree of flexibility and adaptability is therefore required in developing and employing comparative cross-national research strategies. Moreover, the fluidity and dynamism of different societies and institutions require historical as well as other types of analysis.

2 The Need

- 2.1. ESRC has come forward with a number of initiatives supporting research on comparative cross-national methods, for example, through short-term research projects and a network of methodological innovation under the National Centre for Research Methods. However the ESRC appreciates that there is additional need for more comprehensive and coordinated support for research and capacity-building in the area that this call intends to support.
- 2.2. A consultation with members of the UK research community held in 2006 identified the development of comparative research methods as a particular priority.¹³ The need for comparative cross-national research extends to a range of types of research including international survey methods, comparing national and large scale data sources, time-series analysis of country-level administrative data, comparative ethnographies, policy analysis and transferability. However, much of the existing literature on comparative research methods is American or Eurocentric.¹⁴
- 2.3. Recent consultations held by the ESRC further emphasised the necessity to enhance capacity to conduct international and cross-national research. For example, as the Scottish Government put it: “[*Most important and exciting research challenges facing social science in the next five to ten years include*] *Research that uses international comparisons; and research into methods which enable international comparisons.*”¹⁵

¹³ See Nicholas Bardsley and Rose Wiles, ‘A Consultation to Identify the Research Needs in Research Methods in the UK Social Sciences’, ESRC National Centre for Research Methods, University of Southampton, November 2006, <http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/412/1/BW.pdf>

¹⁴ See e.g. L.Hantrais, *International Comparative research*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009

¹⁵ Analysis of ESRC's Strategic Plan Consultation Responses (consultations were held between 13 May and 15 September 2008).

- 2.4. The ESRC recognises the pressing need for research, training and capacity building in comparative cross-national research methods. Comparative cross-national research faces many methodological challenges, especially in research design. For example, choosing and justifying countries, treating countries as ‘fixed’ or ‘random’ effects, selecting appropriate cases and units for comparison, judging the quality of comparative research particularly where studies draw on data sets not explicitly designed for this purpose, data comparability (e.g. accessing and standardising existing national data sets and meta data, addressing issues relating to language difference and analysis (e.g. the equivalence of concepts and variables)). The need to develop methods that address both practical and fundamental issues of comparative research is clear. The Initiative on Methods for Comparative Cross-national Research is tailored to address this need, with an emphasis on methodological advancement, improving the standards of research methods across the UK social science community and informing training and capacity building for researchers involved in cross-national research.
- 2.5. The ESRC is not focusing the Initiative on any particular methodological approach and will fund high-quality proposals from qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods researchers, to maximise benefits of the initiative to the wider research community.
- 2.6. Taking into account patterns of globalisation, as well as responding to the requests coming from the British research community, the scope of this Initiative goes beyond Europe to include other regions of the world. As the British Academy noted: *“the ESRC should... enhance the involvement of British researchers in comparative research not only across Europe but across the major regions of the world.”*¹⁶ The ESRC believes that expanding the scope of the Initiative will foster the UK’s vanguard role in developing research methodology in general and comparative cross-national research methodology in particular, thus strengthening research capacity. Additionally, it will advance the ESRC’s aim of promoting more internationally focussed research to help foster a ‘wider world view’ and how that impacts on research and users of research in the UK.

3 Initiative overview

- 3.1. Projects funded under this initiative should aim to generate expertise and knowledge relevant to methodological development in comparative cross-national research. Projects should generate methodological advancement and/or advance understanding of the implementation of best practice. Training and capacity building will be a significant component of each project.
- 3.2. An Initiative Co-ordinator will ensure that the activities in this strategically important area are synchronised and consolidated to maximise impact and to minimise overlaps in training and capability building.

4 Training and capacity building

- 4.1. Training activities are required as integral components of all funded projects, in order to build capacity in comparative cross-national research methods in the UK social science research community. The training and capacity building activities should draw on the research components of the funded projects and the expertise of the project teams. However applicants can be flexible in the sorts of activities they provide and how they organise training. For example, training might be organised in the form of seminars,

¹⁶ Ibid.

workshops, and short-courses, including podcasts or online resources available via the internet for wider use by academics teaching on relevant subjects. The aim is to develop best practice in cross-national research methods and to cascade this best practice and expertise to the social science research community.

- 4.3. Applicants should identify exit strategies that take account of ongoing training needs.
- 4.4. Applicants may wish to consider including funding for a research-linked studentship (+3 awards). Students will benefit from working as a part of a high quality research team in terms of their substantive research and broader professional development. The cost of the studentship must be included in the total cost of the project. It must also be clear that the studentship is not a displacement for the normal research support required on the grant. The student must have a distinct, independent area of enquiry that will add value to the overall research objectives of the project. Standard ESRC studentship rules for training and supervision and placement within a recognised outlet will apply. Such students will also be expected to complete their PhD within four years, as with ESRC standard studentships. They will be included in the ESRC PhD Submission Rate Survey. Non-completion within four years will therefore affect the Research Organisation's postgraduate submission rate. For guidance on linked studentships see: www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/opportunities/current_funding_opportunities/grant_linked.aspx
- 4.5. The case for a linked studentship will need to be set out in an additional section in the Je-S proposal. Studentships are not costed under full Economic Cost (fEC) arrangements, but if awarded, the grant will meet the full 100% costs of the normal provision for these. Further information on applying for linked studentships can be found in the guidance notes attached Je-S applications protocols for ESRC.

5 Dissemination of outputs

- 5.1 All projects are expected to contribute to ESRC's broader initiative on improving and enhancing capacity in research methods. Taking into account the scope of the Initiative, it is also expected that projects will support the ESRC's globalisation agenda, providing comparative analysis, developing methodologies and enhancing the capacity of the UK research community. The training is expected to serve as a vehicle to reach a wide target audience, both in the UK and internationally, thus enhancing methodological skills among post graduate research students and new experienced researchers, across public, academic, commercial and third sectors. Applicants should specify how they intend to contribute to these requirements in their proposal.

6 Co-ordinator

- 6.1. There is a need to co-ordinate the methodological advancements, training and capacity building, and dissemination elements of the Initiative. To meet this need a Co-ordinator for the Initiative will be appointed. The main task of the Co-ordinator will be to pull together the training and capacity building activities in each of the projects, such as workshops, seminars and other outputs, and to ensure that training activities are built in and support the methodological research being conducted in each project. The Co-ordinator will also play a role in co-ordinating the work of the project teams, making in-person contacts with the teams as well as cross team contacts where appropriate.

- 6.2. Principal applicants for projects are encouraged to apply for the role of Co-ordinator. Applicants who apply for the Co-ordinator role are encouraged to consult with the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) when preparing their applications.
- 6.3. The National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) Hub team will identify synergies between the Initiative and NCRM and will support the Co-ordinator. In particular it will assist with:
- Dissemination, e.g. providing relevant information with respect to planned or the planning of seminars and workshops or by including working papers from the initiative on the NCRM website.
 - Publicity, e.g. providing information on the NCRM website about the Initiative, by including relevant information on the NCRM e-mail releases and by publicising any training events run within the Initiative.
 - Liaison over possible engagement with researchers from project teams in NCRM activities, including at the NCRM summer school and the Research Methods Festival.
- 6.4. To enable a Co-ordinator to undertake his/her duties, they should seek to organise a workshop between successful project applicants immediately after the Initiative begins (expected 1st April 2010). This first workshop should scope the range of work being undertaken by commissioned projects, identify synergies and gaps, develop strategies for joint working, and develop plans to fill unintended gaps in the scope of the work being undertaken. Two other workshops should be undertaken for the midterm and the end of the Initiative. A valuable output of the workshops and the whole initiative in general would be an edited volume, led by the Co-ordinator. The Co-ordinator would be responsible for seeking an academic publisher and co-ordinating the content of the volume with the project teams.

7. Specific requirements

- 7.1. The Initiative is aimed at researchers who are, or have been, engaged in comparative cross-national research.
- 7.2. The case for support (of no more than six sides of A4 at size 12 font) should state clearly the methodological issue or problem to be addressed, the strategy to be developed, and the kind of training activities planned. It should specify the experience and qualifications they will bring to the Initiative and demonstrate their track record in relation to methodological and comparative cross-national research. It should give indicative costs (full economic costs, distinguishing between direct staff costs and other costs) for both aspects of the project (methodological advancement and training and capability building). In particular it should:
- clearly specify the methodological problem/s which the project intends to address;
 - justify the proposed research design (including choice of countries, cases and units for comparison) and methods to be used;
 - detail the nature of the contribution the project is intended to make to methodological development and implementation of best-practice;
 - indicate the impact and value of the methodological development to social sciences in terms of its contribution to comparative cross-national research methods;
 - outline the communities for whom the training is intended and the manner in which the training will be delivered;
 - the timetable for the research.

- 7.3. If applicants wish to bid for the role of Co-ordinator, they should attach a case for support for the role of coordinator as an annex (of no more than two sides of A4 at size 12 font) to the Je-S form. The case for support for the role of Co-ordinator should demonstrate the track record the bidder has in terms of co-ordinating training and capability building activities, give indicative costs (full economic costs, distinguishing between direct staff costs and other costs) for the co-ordination activities, an outline of the proposed approach to co-ordinate the projects within the Initiative, as well as provisional plans for the workshops and dissemination activities.
- 7.3. Although the focus of the initiative is on *methods* of comparative research, projects will require substantive research questions upon which to base the methodological work they conduct. The call does not specify substantive areas of research, but applicants should justify their choice in the application. When considering the substantive focus of their research, applicants may wish to consult the research challenges identified in the ESRC's Strategic plan.
- 7.4. It is anticipated that applicants will use existing data sets rather than creating new ones. Although applicants are encouraged to be flexible in their choice of different methodological approaches, the choice of data sets must be justified, supporting the choice with a focus on quality and utility.
- 7.5. Applicants may wish to consider addressing some of the following broad methodological issues:
- Choosing and justifying countries, cases and units for comparison;
 - Considering issues in relation to accessing and standardizing national data sets across countries;
 - Considering the issue of the equivalence of concepts and variables across comparison sites;
 - Judging the quality of comparative cross-national research including studies that draw on data sets not explicitly designed for this purpose;
 - Addressing issues relating to language difference and the dominance of English language in comparative cross-national research.

8 Budget

- 8.1. The budget available for this Initiative is **£1.2m (full Economic Cost)** over four years from 1 April 2010, total amount being divided into four equal parts.
- 8.2. As per standard funding rules the ESRC will contribute 80% of this total budget. It is anticipated that approximately four to six projects, as well as coordination activities will be funded under the Initiative.

9 Application Procedure

- 9.1. Full proposals must be submitted to the ESRC via the Joint Electronic Submission System (Je-S) by **4pm on Tuesday 25th August 2009**. If you are not currently Je-S registered and intend to apply please ensure that you allow sufficient time for registration as no extensions to the deadline will be permitted. Hard-copy, faxed or e-mail applications will not be accepted.

- 9.4. All submitted proposals will in the first instance be assessed by an international panel of referees. This panel will be established by the ESRC and referees will be leaders within, but not limited to, the field of research methodology, economics, political science, sociology, demography. Applicants will have the opportunity to respond to referee comments in the week commencing 12th October 2009.
- 9.5. A Commissioning Panel, chaired by a member of ESRC's Research Resources Board, will be established by the ESRC to select the projects to be supported under the Initiative. The Panel will include representation from the academic community. To ensure the coherence of the overall initiative, the Commissioning Panel may require changes to research proposals as well as collaborative arrangements among projects as conditions of awards made under the initiative.
- 9.6. Project duration should be no longer than 48 months. It is expected that successful projects will commence from **1st April 2010** and finish by **31st March 2014**.
- 9.7. Any enquires relating to the initiative or to ESRC research funding rules should be addressed to:
- Kristine Doronenkova
 Direct dial: 01793 444303
 Email: kristine.doronenkova@esrc.ac.uk
- 9.8. Please refer to the Je-S guidance notes when completing the Je-S application form. Any enquiries relating to the Je-S application procedure should be addressed to the Je-S Helpdesk at:
- Telephone: 01793 444164
 Email: Je-Shelp@rcuk.ac.uk
 Website help: <https://je-s.rcuk.ac.uk/jexHandBook/jesHelp.aspx>

10 Provisional Timetable

6 May 2009	Call for applications advertised
25 August 2009 4pm	Deadline for applications
w/c 5 October 2009	Referee comments sent to applicants for feedback
13 October 2009	Deadline for feedback from applicants
w/c 23 November 2009	Commissioning Panel Meeting (TBC)
Mid December 2009	Decisions announced <i>(Please note that should you be successful you may be asked to quickly respond to any conditions set by the Commissioning Panel to help facilitate processing of the contract)</i>
February/March 2010	Contracts prepared and issued
1 st April 2010	Grants commence