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ESRC Longitudinal Studies Review 2017

By email: rebecca.fairbairn@esrc.ac.uk, bridget.taylor@esrc.ac.uk

4 November 2016

Dear Rebecca and Bridget,

This letter sets out the Nuffield Foundation's response to the Economic and Social Research Council's consultation on the longitudinal studies it funds

The Nuffield Foundation is a charitable trust established by William Morris, Lord Nuffield, the founder of Morris Motors. Our aim is to improve social well-being, and we do this by:

- Funding research and innovation projects in education and social policy, with a strong emphasis on quantitative analysis using existing datasets. In 2015 we funded 34 new projects with a total value of £5 million.
- Building research capacity in science and social science, most notably through Q-Step, a £19.5m programme designed to promote a step-change in quantitative social science training for undergraduates (co-funded with the Economic and Social Research Council and Higher Education Funding Council for England, and Nuffield Research Placements, which provide Year 12 students with the opportunity to undertake STEM research projects.

Relevance to our work

Many of the research projects that the Nuffield Foundation funds draw upon, or would benefit from, access to and analysis of longitudinal data. The availability of rich longitudinal surveys, alongside administrative data and other research sources, is essential in addressing our research priorities. These include distribution of social and economic outcomes, how these change over the course of a lifetime and the causes and consequences of disparities in outcomes. Our funded research delivers evidence to inform policy-makers and practitioners across the education and justice systems as well as a range of other social policy institutions. As such, the development of ESRC-funded and other longitudinal studies, within the wider data infrastructure, to meet current and future evidence needs is pivotal.

The Foundation has welcomed the constructive relationship it has developed with the ESRC on longitudinal data infrastructure. This has included our jointly funded work with the ESRC to enhance the coverage of fathers and partners on *Life Study* which demonstrated our

desire to see longitudinal studies push the boundaries in better capturing a wider range of experience than the 'traditional' birth cohorts. Extending that theme, a number of current Nuffield-funded research projects have identified important gaps. For example, even with the rich combination of birth cohorts and *Understanding Society*, we do not have sufficient data to understand increasingly complex family structures, including those resulting from family separation, and it is clear that some key disadvantaged groups (such as looked after children and children of recent immigrants) are inadequately represented in existing longitudinal data sources.

The remainder of this letter sets out the views of the Nuffield Foundation on the two substantive areas of the consultation, the scientific priorities for longitudinal studies and the methodological and technological priorities. First, however, we set out our views on the importance of framing the ESRC's contribution to longitudinal resources in the broader evidence landscape.

General points

It is our belief that - despite important developments in the quality and availability of administrative data for research purposes - longitudinal surveys will continue to be required to provide a crucially important role in the data landscape. Surveys provide important evidence that cannot be gleaned from administrative sources and shine a light on the increasing proportion of the population who may not be covered by such sources as some areas of state provision shrink.

The combination of surveys and administrative data – especially where it is possible to link the two – can yield especially valuable insights. For example, linking administrative records on school exam results and higher education entry with survey data on social background and attitudes towards education has yielded key insights about the role that aspirations play in decision making among different disadvantaged groups with regard to participation in higher education.¹ However, there remain many challenges in securing access, notwithstanding the important investments that ESRC has made through its Administrative Data Research Network initiative. The Foundation has welcomed the contribution that CLOSER has made in seeking to find solutions to these challenges, and to promoting longitudinal resources more generally. It seems to us that there is a need to improve the capacity of the research community to design, deliver and analyse longitudinal data. We would urge the ESRC to continue to invest in these aspects of the infrastructure, beyond the data themselves.

It is vital that the ESRC and other funders provide a strong voice on the vital role such surveys play, and their position in informing policy and practice. As such we think it is important that the ESRC positions its review within this wider landscape and sets out the key evidence gaps that longitudinal surveys in principle could meet, regardless of whether they are currently funded by the ESRC or not, or of a design most associated with the ESRC suite of surveys i.e., general population focus, birth cohort design. There is an obvious need to ensure that the contributions of MRC and ESRC to longitudinal resources are fully aligned, but we would urge the ESRC to think even more broadly about how it can work to shape the collective value of investment so it adds up to more than the sum of the parts.

Scientific priorities

Situating longitudinal surveys within the broader societal, cultural and political dynamics will be increasingly important as the pace of change quickens, and potentially while the life course lengthens the generational shifts widen or become more frequent. With the welcome exception of *Understanding Society*, ESRC's investments have almost exclusively focused on single birth cohort design. As valuable as these are, it seems to us that a wider range of study designs will be needed which can better capture the dynamics of an increasingly diverse and fragmented society.

If a new birth cohort design is being considered, and in light of the limitations of only taking a birth cohort and of the considerable gap between the Millennium Cohort Study and any new cohort, we would recommend that consideration is given instead to taking a suite of cohorts. For example, taking children of different ages (e.g. birth, aged three) to help plug the gaps and allow for more sophisticated analysis. Alternatively, evidence from existing studies that throws light on the key transitions which relate to life outcomes, and where there is potential for strong policy and practice interface, could be used to suggest cohorts at key life stages/events (such as the approach taken by English Longitudinal Study of Ageing and other longitudinal studies of ageing).

Some of these cohorts may deliver significant findings over a relatively short period, and not necessitate long term follow up. With rapid social changes and a longer life course, the longer term evidence on links between childhood experiences and much later life outcomes from a single cohort may increasingly lack relevance for policy and practice (as well as being increasingly difficult to capture with sample attrition).

In addition, we believe the ESRC should assess the 'missing' parts of the puzzle, specifically the significant groups of the population who tend to be under-represented or unidentifiable in many administrative and survey sources, or who are excluded from them altogether, or feature in such small numbers that it is impossible to draw robust conclusions (e.g. recent immigrants, children in care). Existing evidence tells us how certain hard to reach or marginalised groups tend to fare worse in a number of dimensions, but we lack evidence on the pathways or the points where interventions may be most effective. The data void in relation to these groups is a significant barrier to addressing key research issues that the Foundation is interested in. Identifying approaches to better cover these 'missing' groups has the potential for considerable policy and practice implications, and will demonstrate the relevance of the studies to significant social policy decisions.

Methodological and technical developments

A continued focus on how best to utilise, or link to, administrative data, could provide a way to facilitate the coverage of hard-to-reach groups, as well as offering options for more efficient (and cheaper) survey design. While it is important to be mindful of potential changes to administrative data undermining longitudinal surveys if too closely aligned, there are significant opportunities for a more joined up approach. We urge the ESRC to take this into consideration.

Embracing new methodological developments to deliver longitudinal studies more efficiently and cheaply, and in a way that engages respondents is important, although a note of caution

is required around ensuring all groups can participate. Designs that allow for mixed modes and flexibility in the timing of data collection should be considered. Much of the population is now more data informed and data involved, and expect quick and up-to-date information. A design involving lengthy face-to-face interviews every few years is unlikely to resonate with how people increasingly live their lives, or to be responsive to rapid changes that are experienced. Harnessing digital approaches to data collection will be an important consideration. While the issue of mode effects should not be dismissed, nor should we assume that a single mode works for all individuals equally and consistently over time - the effects are simply hidden.

Given the significant costs of longitudinal data sources, and the need for methodological innovation given declining (and differential) response rates, it is essential that sufficient investment is made to test new approaches thoroughly. The strong capability outside the academic sector in the design and operational delivery of surveys is an important resource that should be built into the ESRC's strategy for methodological development.

The ESRC should consider designs that enable the dynamics of geography, built infrastructure and community to be better integrated with the survey data, allowing for the examination of different influences at different levels. This would allow for increased devolution of power and delivery of services to be better accounted for in analysis.

We believe that this review is pivotal in helping shape the future data infrastructure necessary for the 21st century, and the ESRC should be ambitious in its approach. We hope you will find these views useful and would be very happy to provide more details on any of the issues discussed in this response.

Yours sincerely,



Teresa Williams
Director of Social Research and Policy

ⁱ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/474269/BIS-15-462-understanding-progression-into-higher-education-final.pdf