

Training for International Social Research

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The International Social Research Training Project was a joint activity of the LSE Centre for International Studies in co-operation with the Social Research Association. The programme was funded by the ESRC under their Researcher Development Initiative, co-ordinated by Dr John Kent and Dr Steen Mangen on behalf of the CIS, and delivered between 2010 and 2012 by Professors Julia Brannen and Linda Hantrais as academic consultants, and Dr David Filipović-Carter as professional facilitator.

Programme structure and workshop design

The suite of training activities comprised a launch event in May 2010 at the British Library, at which senior researchers and research managers identified the training needs of their staff in international social research methods. The launch was followed by a series of five interlinking London-based workshops delivered between December 2010 and June 2011 at venues provided by the British Library, Society for Research in Higher Education and British Council.

The workshops were designed to meet the needs of researchers who are engaged in, embarking on or using social research with an international dimension. They targeted early career, as well as more senior, researchers, in all sectors (academia, local and central government, government agencies, voluntary and independent organisations) and from different cultures.

Aims and objectives

The overarching aims of the programme of interactive training workshops developed by the project team were to foster and enhance:

- methodological skills and knowledge in conducting research in international settings;
- competence in designing, conducting and managing international comparative projects;
- awareness of epistemological, methodological and practical issues;
- quality and professional and ethical standards in international research;
- confidence among UK researchers equipping them to bid for and participate in international social research;
- links between UK social researchers and the international social research community;
- and sustainable provision in the area of international research.

More specific objectives were:

- to raise awareness across the UK social research community of epistemological, methodological and practical issues relating to international research;
- to increase the capacity of UK social researchers to undertake international research;
- to improve the quality and professional standard of international research carried out by UK social researchers;
- to raise levels of confidence among UK social researchers, enabling them to bid for and participate in international social research;
- to foster links between UK social researchers and the international social research community;

- to develop sustainable provision in the area of international research that would continue to provide support for researchers beyond the life of the ESRC RDI programme.

Outputs

The project concluded with an event at Europe House, London, in July 2012, to launch an online databank of international social research methods case studies based on the workshop materials. The website is being hosted by [ReStore](#), the Sustainable Web Resources Repository, under the auspices of the National Centre for Research Methods at the University of Southampton.

The expanding databank of case studies takes readers through the stages of planning, designing and implementing international research projects in the social sciences, using a Framework developed at the workshops and subsequently applied as an English-language drafting tool for social scientists. A number of the participants at the workshops have since written up their case studies for the databank, and SAGE have accepted adapted versions for their Cases in Methods databank.

Impacts

The main scientific impact of the programme of international social research training workshops developed by the project team lies in its contribution to methodological advancement and capacity building across and within social science and humanities disciplines. This objective was achieved by adopting a systematic and structured approach to the totality of the international social research process.

A total of over 200 researchers at various stages of their careers, from different disciplinary (24 disciplines), national (28 countries), cultural and sectoral backgrounds (academic, public and private sector organisations), benefitted directly from the programme.

Participants appreciated having the opportunity to reflect on the research process, to analyse and critique the available data sources, and to extend and refine the array of research tools at their disposal. The training emphasised the importance of assessing the effectiveness of different policy measures by locating them in relation to the national contexts in which they are implemented, and the programme made researchers aware of particularities of the funding contexts of international social research. The project team also sought to assist researchers in their interaction with policy advisers and policy makers by raising awareness of the value and limitations of the research findings from international projects, and the need to develop and apply robust procedures for collecting reliable comparable evidence.

As one of the workshop participants and ReStore authors commented:

In terms of the general impact, the RDI successfully met an urgent need in providing first-rate training and professional development in international comparative research methods in the social sciences. Prior to this initiative, very little if any specific training was available despite the growing emphasis on both interdisciplinarity and internationalisation in driving innovation in social science research. The series of workshops fully addressed this need by bringing social scientists together to share their experiences, skills and priorities in both cross-disciplinary and international research, as well as identifying the potential for future collaboration.

Speaking personally, the impact of the project has been very significant. I was able to hone my skills in all aspects of international comparative research in the social sciences ranging from issues relating to epistemology and research methods to the practicalities of project management and the cultural sensitivities of working with diverse cross-disciplinary and international teams. These skills have been crucial to my role as programme leader and in making funding applications for international and/or cross-disciplinary partnerships.

(Michael Wilson, University of Leeds)

Spin-off activities

The RDI programme formed the basis for a proposal for a series of seminars on '[Social Science Evidence and the Policy Process: International Insights](#)', organised in 2013–14 under the auspices of the Academy of Social Sciences International Advisory Group, with support from the CIS. Elements from the RDI project are being

incorporated into the programme for a Fellows Seminar hosted at the CIS at LSE in July/August 2014 on '[Global Social Governance: Developing International Social Science Research and impacting the Policy Process](#)', in co-operation with the International Social Science Council. Read about the linked issue of Contemporary Social Science here.

