



Response to the proposal to establish a UK research centre on charitable giving and philanthropy prepared by Peter Halfpenny on behalf of the Voluntary Sector Studies Network (VSSN)

The VSSN welcomes the proposal and is in agreement with much of the consultation document. The proposed Centre would provide an exciting opportunity to draw together and advance research that has hitherto been fragmented and lacked cumulative impact. In the spirit of VSSN as a mutually supportive network, the emphasis of the responses below is on collaboration across the rather sparse and dispersed research community, drawing on existing expertise in pursuit of the Centre's objectives rather than competing with established centres and organisations.

Question 1.

The Centre represents a welcome investment in research capacity, but it will have a limited budget and will be unable to satisfy everyone's needs. The Centre's primary focus will be on research to inform effective policy and practice. Within that overarching goal, we welcome views on:

- The balance to be achieved between the functions above (5-12)
- The balance between core monitoring of charitable giving and philanthropy distribution and more specific projects on, for example, new developments.
- The focus on charitable giving and philanthropy, and what we mean by these vis a vis other transfers into the sector from institutions such as companies.

VSSN response

Given the limited initial budget, the focus should be, at least in the first instance, on charitable giving rather than on wider aspects of philanthropy or novel topics. Even this topic – charitable giving – is broad, for it includes giving of money, time and in kind by individuals, corporations and grant-making trusts, and the recipients vary in a myriad of ways, not least from being very small to very big. To start with, the two guiding issues should be the determinants of giving and the effects (or outcomes) of giving. The former must include attention to fundraising activities and the latter must include giving's effectiveness in promoting social justice. For both issues, preliminary work of conceptual clarification of dependent and independent variables would be valuable, followed by consideration of appropriate ways of operationalising the key concepts. An example might be to consider how charitable giving of money is located – by donors – within the context of their other financial transactions and their giving in other forms, and within the wider context of their everyday social interactions and the communities to which they belong, including importantly faith communities. Such preliminary, ground-clearing work would be aided by systematic reviews of the best quality research on donating and volunteering that has been conducted in the UK and elsewhere. An international element in the systematic reviews is vital because some of the research on giving conducted in other countries is more advanced than work on giving in the UK.

Excellence in giving research will only be possible if it is grounded in high quality data, quantitative and qualitative. It will therefore be important to devote resources to data collection, but this must build on accomplishments to date. These include, especially, the NCVO/CAF surveys of giving and the Home Office sponsored survey of volunteering and giving, but also other relevant government studies and the data collection undertaken by voluntary sector organisations themselves. (Access to some of this data – the anonymised raw data and not just the reported findings – will be a challenge, but it must be addressed, with the assistance of the funders.) Again, systematic reviews would form a starting point,

including a critical analysis of the research designs with the aim of refining the research methodology. The establishment of a longitudinal dimension to data collection, for example through a new panel study or a module on an existing panel or cohort study (as opposed to a sequence of cross-sectional studies), is essential if current understandings of giving are to be rigorously tested. Is there time to have giving included in the ESRC's new UK longitudinal household survey, to be launched in 2008?

All data sources must be exploited to the limit through participation in the analysis by the most technically proficient researchers applying the most advanced techniques, both quantitative and qualitative.

All the research must draw on the resources of numerous disciplines. Similarly, it must recognise the different needs of the varied stakeholder groups, for whom the issues of the determinants of giving and the effects of giving will have different interpretations.

Question 2.

A previous consultation undertaken in early 2006 highlighted the need to ensure that the Centre is both independent of and responsive to the Third Sector and funders. Governance structures will be critical in achieving this balance. We welcome views on ways in which this balance may be achieved. For example, what might be (a) the composition and (b) the role of the governance structure?

VSSN response

Experience of other Centres indicates that the proposed structure, of a Director guided by a steering committee with its members drawn from stakeholder groups under an independent chair, can work well, though success is vitally dependent on the skills of the chair and the composition of the committee. An incremental process of building up the committee membership over time provides an opportunity to add expertise when its need becomes apparent, and there must be a mechanism for renewal of the committee over time.

Responsibility for the research strategy of the Centre should lie with the Director, though it should be subject to comment and advice from the steering committee. Whether the funders should be represented on the steering committee is a moot point, as it could muddle oversight of the research programme with financial accountability. The latter might be better discharged by the Director reporting to the proposed programme management group.

The process of commissioning research will need careful thought. The Director and others in the host institution must have the opportunity to undertake work that otherwise might be commissioned from elsewhere. A conflict of interest must be avoided, where the Director develops a research programme to which s/he wishes to contribute but which s/he is denied the opportunity to bid for on the grounds that s/he instigated the proposal.

The notion of the Centre being a Virtual Organisation is slightly misleading. The UK giving research community is thinly spread over several institutions, including universities, umbrella organisations, independent research agencies, individual consultants and so on. The Director must have an institutional location in a research active and supportive environment, but the Centre must be designed so that it can draw on the best of the wider voluntary sector research community's expertise. It might be better described as a distributed Centre, with the research programme being conducted in several locations across the country. Experience shows that such collaborative, interdisciplinary, distributed centres can work very effectively; indeed it is the direction in which much of modern scientific research is moving with support from the Research Councils. Moreover, the Voluntary Sector Studies Network activities – biannual seminars and a joint annual conference with NCVO as well as an active email list – demonstrate a high degree of mutual support across the research community and the Centre should harness this collaborative potential.

A distributed Centre of the sort described above will need a Strategy Board, chaired by the Director and comprising representatives from each site, meeting face-to-face or virtually at least four times per year. Its remit would be to develop and maintain an overview of the

Centre's whole research programme, ensuring that the strands pursued at the sites are well integrated.

Question 3.

One of the first tasks of the Centre is likely to be a systematic assessment of current knowledge and gaps in that. We welcome views on priority issues for research on (a) giving (b) fundraising and (c) distribution/grantmaking. Please list 3 issues, in order of urgency, you would like to see covered in each category.

VSSN response

As noted in the response to Question 1, commissioning systematic reviews of existing research and data would form a good starting point.

A danger of soliciting lists of priority issues in a consultation exercise such as this is that they will be generated by a biased sample of respondents. A more systematic approach would be for the Director to organise some agenda-setting workshops on a small number of research areas, in each of which a group of experts and stakeholders considers a systematic review of current work and collectively generates a prioritised research agenda. Such workshops could be on, for example, determinants of giving, effects of giving and data sources and requirements. The research agendas they generate would have to take account of the different interests of different stakeholders. The agendas would also need to build on and complement existing work already being undertaken in other centres, rather than compete with it.

Sufficient investment in this preparatory phase is essential if the Centre is to establish itself as the place where the highest quality research is produced. Too many initiatives rush through the preliminaries in order to start data collection, yet the best research is that in which a third of the available time is given to preparation, a third to the conduct of the research and a third to dissemination. A long term view will eventually deliver best value for money. In the light of this, the proposed review of the Centre after the first 18 months of its operation must take account of research that demonstrates that the cumulative impact of newly funded research programmes does not become significant until three or four years after they begin.¹

The three topics on which views are requested in Question 3 to some extent pre-empt the research agenda. For example, fundraising is an important determinant of giving of money, but it needs to be considered in the context of other determinants rather than as a priori more significant than others. Similarly grantmaking is but one of a basket of variables that need to be considered together.

Question 4.

If the Centre is to fulfil its purposes, effective communication and engagement is central to all its work. We welcome views on the most effective (a) methods and (b) channels of communication and engagement.

VSSN response

The obvious answer is multiple methods through multiple channels to meet the needs of multiple, diverse stakeholders. Some will want results cast as practical actions that can be applied for the benefit of the voluntary sector. Others will want policy proposals, sufficiently soundly based in the evidence to convince the government and other authorities to act on them. Others will want finely detailed findings that tease out complexities and indicate directions for further empirical work. Others will want awareness-raising or marketing materials. Yet others will seek methodological advances in data collection or analysis. What is needed is a dissemination strategy that identifies the various audiences for the Centre's work and develops appropriately tailored activities, events and materials to reach each audience effectively. Stakeholders should be involved at the communication and engagement stage (just as the responses above maintain they should be involved at the research agenda-setting

¹ G Crespi and A Geuna, 'Modelling and measuring scientific production', Science Policy Research Unit Paper number 133, University of Sussex.

stage), both to offer valuable advice on the dissemination strategy and as partners in its delivery.

It will be important to fund the dissemination strategy adequately, it being a common mistake to underestimate the cost of communication and engagement, both the time taken and the money it absorbed. Dissemination must not be an afterthought, but an integral part of the Centre's overall research and development programme.

Given how small and dispersed the UK giving research community is at present, the Centre should also take the opportunity to build capacity, not only internally through PhD students and postdoctoral fellowships, but also externally through CASE studentships, visiting fellowships, internships, exchanges, training schools and roadshows. Capacity building activities should also include the production of training materials for delivery online or face-to-face, either to stand alone or as part of undergraduate, postgraduate and other courses. Again, all these must take account of existing capacity building activities and complement them, perhaps through partnerships with other centres and organisations, rather than compete with them.

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