

# EDUCATION & RESEARCH COMMITTEE: ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

**BRIAN DANGERFIELD** (LIAISON WITH ESRC), SALFORD UNIVERSITY

In the spirit of keeping the membership informed about the governance of the Society, the members of the Education & Research Committee have committed to writing short monthly articles covering various examples of what we do. This is the first and I have chosen to explain our relations with the *Economic & Social Research Council* (ESRC).



Brian Dangerfield

Whilst monitoring and liaising with the *Engineering & Physical Sciences Research Council* (EPSRC) might be thought to be more appropriate for O.R. (and my colleague Tim Bedford will write about that in a subsequent issue) consider two important facts:

firstly, it is ESRC which is home to research in Business & Management Studies and Economics and

secondly; over the past 25 years or so, the subject-matter of O.R. has been extended to include what is often termed *Soft O.R.* (*sort of more oo aah, so to speak*). In short the toolkit of an operational researcher has been extended beyond classical optimisation techniques and heavily mathematical approaches to embrace methods which address more complex problematques involving multiple stakeholders, replete with human and social influences and the need to deal with interaction effects. Moreover, it has been UK researchers who have figured predominantly in the vanguard of those making this transition in the O.R. landscape.

Given the above context I am currently engaged in a dialogue with ESRC with respect to the recently-launched site for a *National Centre for Research Methods* (<http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/>) which underpins the type of advanced training to which post-graduate researchers (PGR) in the social sciences can expect to be exposed. In 2012 there was apparently a poor response to a national survey which endeavoured to determine the range of advanced training which might be made available to a PGR and whether any additional provision should be commissioned. Both the above

website and typical texts on research methods in the social sciences cover standard approaches which are usually confined to statistical/data analysis techniques, questionnaire design & analysis and econometrics.

The view of the ERC is that there is a lack of pluralism in social science research methodologies. O.R. is the home to a number of the newer methodologies, for instance: systems thinking; cognitive mapping; system dynamics; soft systems methodology; strategic choice approach; discrete-event simulation. These are not heavily mathematical (and thus appropriate for EPSRC doctoral students only) but are of an analytical nature and surely need to be on the awareness list of business, management and economics research students, at the very least. Even sociologists might find some of this diverse array of tools to be methodologically acceptable (sometimes superior) when judged against existing and conventional approaches. There is evidence from the publishing world that traditional social science research methods are too restrictive: see the Call from Routledge for chapters for their forthcoming *Handbook of Applied Systems Science*.

([http://www.msu.edu/~zpnear/handbook\\_cfp.pdf](http://www.msu.edu/~zpnear/handbook_cfp.pdf))

Another ESRC initiative concerns the impact of research. Anyone contemplating the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercise will know that impact carries a considerable weight (20%) in the overall assessment of each academic unit. To this end, the ESRC are celebrating impact by inaugurating an annual Impact Prize relating to five different forms of impact together with an overall *Impact Champion*. Winners receive £10,000. To submit an application you need to have some funding connection with the ESRC, either current or in the recent past. Unfortunately, by the time you read this, the deadline for 2013 submissions will have passed but members may wish to look out for next year's competition. In addition the categories for the prize could perhaps offer some clues for those charged with writing their impact narrative for the REF.