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 **Abstract**

Recent times have seen a significant reorientation in public funding for academic research across many countries. Public bodies in the UK have been at the forefront of such activities, typically justified in terms of a need to meet the challenges of international competitiveness and improve quality of life. One set of mechanisms advanced for further achieving these goals is the incorporation of users' needs into various aspects of the research process. This paper examines some of the consequences of greater user involvement in the UK Economic and Social Research Council by drawing on both empirical evidence and more speculative argumentation. In doing so it poses some of the dilemmas for conceptualizing proper user involvement.

 **Introduction**

- 1.1 The last few years have seen an emphasis in many industrialised countries on harnessing publicly funded research for the goals of national competitiveness and quality of life. These goals have attempted to be achieved by encouraging researchers to pursue topics relevant to 'users' and conduct inquiry in a manner appropriate for them. Now in the UK, all the Research Councils and public sector research agencies operate within a language of users and a policy orientation which reflects the current political focus on wealth creation and quality of life. While attempts to improve the user and commercial relevance of physical sciences and engineering research in universities have generated significant, and sometimes critical, commentary, the social sciences are typically excluded from such analysis. This paper begins to rectify this situation.
- 1.2 While funding changes towards users pose problems for universities and their academic staff (Tapper and Salter, 1995), this paper only looks at problems at the level of researchers. It explores the attitudes of a number of researchers conducting research relevant to users and asks what problems they face in light of this turn to users in funding arrangements. Evidence is drawn from a survey of academics engaged in projects deemed relevant to business by their funding agency, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). As this paper demonstrates, the process of making research appropriate to 'users' is not straightforward. Notions of what constitutes a proper user, for instance, are contested. As a result, it will be

argued that the means of incorporating users in the research process are problematic.

- 1.3 The paper is divided into seven sections. The next briefly summarises some of the major policy points surrounding the ESRC and provides some initial comments on user relations. The following two sections describe the survey undertaken along with the findings. Mixed with the findings are more speculative comments on the implications of user relations on the research process. The fifth section builds on these arguments and the problematic aspects of user involvement identified by respondents to consider an existing programme of user involvement. This is followed by a consideration of what types of alternative 'user' relations are possible. The final section draws a number of conclusions from the preceding discussion.



The Research Scene

- 2.1 Numerous commentators have elaborated on recent calls for enhanced accountability and value for money from public services in the UK (see eg. [Rappert, 1995](#)). These include both measures designed to enhance effectiveness and efficiency in performance and to ensure academics' responsiveness to 'societal' demands for research. Such calls, of course, are not limited to academic social and economic research but rather are pervasive throughout publicly funded agencies. The internal operation of national laboratories, the relationship between funding agencies and researchers, and the interaction of government institutions become organised around the discourse of 'users' and 'customer-contractor' relations (see eg. [du Gay and Salaman 1992](#)). Public funding for research has become more and more dependent on the perception of whether it will make a direct contribution to the economy (see eg. [Nature, 1994](#)). Recent years have witnessed a steady shift away from policies which either champion the autonomy of researchers or try and direct research towards specific social needs. Universities and other public institutions act as agents for industrial policy, often for governments unwilling to overtly establish industrial policies.
- 2.2 The restructuring of the university research system has been legitimated through the language of enterprise and the strength of Conservative politics, though this restructuring is not solely or necessarily even primarily related to the success of Conservative parties per se. Calls for accountability and the utilisation of research are nothing new. Most governments, funding agencies, and academics have long abandoned the assumption that providing ample resources for research will in itself lead to societal benefits. While universities might be seen as sources of economic strength for meeting future challenges, they are also portrayed as insular and sometimes self-serving. How shifts in policy and forms of legitimisation translate into particular practices though is a matter of much uncertainty.
- 2.3 [Crook et al \(1994\)](#) and [Hill and Turpin \(1994\)](#) interpret these developments as part of a wider cultural transformation from modernist to post-modern culture. As universities are becoming more complex and systematised the labour processes of research in the physical, life and natural sciences as well as social sciences are moving from systems based on individual autonomy to centralised policies focusing on teams of multidisciplinary researchers. These teams follow the signals of intertwined grant and commercial markets. As a result 'the meaning of "outputs" and of work in universities are calculated according to "efficiency and effectiveness", according to abstract commodity value rather than substantive significance of any sort' ([Hill and Turpin, 1994: p. 350](#)). The developments are so pervasive that 'often the very symbols of marketplace replace the symbols of knowledge production that gave meaning to the knowledge domain in the first place' ([p. 345](#)). Research is at a point where its exponential growth can no longer be maintained. With this limitation in growth comes the imposition of governmental or commercial demands on the research agenda of academic science. The organised autonomous social system of science based on the trade of 'scientific

commodities' for power and reputation is becoming displaced by disorganised commercial market commodity systems. This paper considers limited aspects of this reported transformation of the research system: the research-user exchange relation and the current role of users in constructing the meaning of research.

- 2.4** Governments' main instrument for promoting change in the research system is financial. The ESRC is the largest single funder of social and economic research in the UK, allocating £60 million per year. Although formally an independent organisation, the ESRC receives a Grant-in-Aid from Government and this is occasionally supplemented by other funds, most of which also come from public sector sources, so the ESRC must take account of changing government priorities. In recent years, the ESRC's mission statement has been altered to recognise 'the importance of research undertaken to meet the needs of users and to support wealth creation' (HMSO, 1993: p. 27). As the mission statement reads, the ESRC's objective is:

To promote and support high quality basic, strategic and applied social science research and related post-graduate training to increase understanding of social and economic change, placing special emphasis on meeting the needs of the users of its research and training output, thereby enhancing the United Kingdom's industrial competitiveness and quality of life (HMSO, 1993: p. 29).

- 2.5** Users in this context include industry, charities, universities, local authorities and other public bodies, government departments and independent policy bodies. Users are involved in a wide range of practices including setting thematic priorities for funding, evaluating research, and shaping programmes. In recent years, the thematic priorities of the Council have been designed to reflect the priorities of both the research community and the user community (ESRC, 1995).
- 2.6** Despite such important modifications in the funding system, there has been little commentary or analysis of the effect of user involvement. The ESRC has done some internal work to evaluate problems with collaborations. While academic-business collaboration is typically presented as a two-way exchange benefiting both sides - academics gain access to vital sources while the partner receives independent expertise - it is recognised that a number of practical problems arise in such efforts. The recognised difficulties include initiating collaboration, carrying out and maintaining commitment, producing outputs, and a feared shift to applied research (see eg. Segal Quince Wicksteed, 1992)^[1].
- 2.7** Although such commentaries highlight a number of caveats for researchers, they do little to critically evaluate the merits and desirability of moving towards a more 'user centred' research system or present options on the types of user centred schemes that might be available. They also do little to address the question of whether academics see the shifting relations as a threat or a welcomed opportunity to reach (and perhaps even influence) a wider audience. The attitudes of academics to user changes is likely to vary across disciplines because of past relationships of researchers with users, substantive focus, and methodological approaches.
- 2.8** Consider as well the process surrounding meeting users' needs. Focusing on meeting users' needs raises important questions about the extent and nature of user involvement and in particular what this means in terms of bringing 'external' (user) criteria to bear on the 'internal' workings of research. Some may contend that we need to minimise external interference in the internal workings of science as current calls for relevance influence not only the selection of problems but the standards of research quality and significance. So, 'external' agents should provide access to research settings and perhaps influence broad-brush funding allocations, rather than applying criteria of relevance to individual research projects, let alone play a more active role in formulating research agendas. Such a position might further maintain that one of the primary responsibilities and insights of social research is to redefine conventional thinking

by approaching topics in a manner different from and perhaps even alien to those of the user. In other words, social scientists might try to give users and 'society' more generally what it needs in terms of independent and critical analysis rather than what it demands or feels comfortable with.

- 2.9** If we conceptualise meeting users' needs as a process of negotiation though it would seem prudent to establish fairly intense levels of user involvement at an early stage of designing the research agenda. In this line, [Woolgar \(1997\)](#) criticises the 'supermarket' model of research whereby the inherent quality of research products is assumed. Rather than dressing up research in the best garb to attract the punters, social scientists should engage with users early on in order to fashion and respond to their needs. As [Clare \(1997\)](#) notes, though feedback to audiences is of vital importance in research, 'This is not just in the sense of reporting issues in a way that your audience can easily understand and make use of, where relevant. It is also about reporting issues in a way that will make the audience potentially more receptive to the issues.' Yet, the models of 'closeness' with users underlying these comments does not necessarily rest well with promoting the least biased research, especially when some user groups are prioritised over others.
- 2.10** Of crucial importance to such debates is the definition and value attached to notions such as unbiasedness, disinterestedness, 'truth' and the qualities of social scientists more generally (see [Hammersley and Gomm \(1997\)](#) for an extended discussion of bias in social research). Since many researchers in the social sciences have given up the pretence of being able to conduct value-free, objective, and politically neutral research, what else might we have to offer? While maintaining their legitimacy with respect to government, the ESRC is tied in with indicators of quality and credibility in the academic community and thus plays a significant part in forming the identity of researchers ([Rip, 1994](#)). Given the importance of perceptions of impartiality by users, the position taken by funding agencies has implications for the ability to carry out research (see eg. [CLARE, 1997](#)).
- 2.11** We might conceptualise the extent of bias, for instance, as rooted in social structures of researchers, rather than being primarily a matter of researchers deciding to act in an unbiased manner. Speaking in generalities, one could argue that the most unbiased researchers are those that operate under the set of the most diffuse interests, rather than being committed to any particular social interest. Of course, if some types of users are systematically appreciated over others, then this concept of being unbiased would be compromised. As [Abraham \(1995\)](#) and others have noted, tying research and regulation to the interests of a narrow span of users can help create national wealth, but at a social price.
- 2.12** Conversely, we may argue that the possibility of academic researchers adopting a position of unbiasedness is limited and is not necessarily desirable. Rather the issue is one of researchers being self-conscious and reflexive about the implications of their commitments. This sort of argument though, seems at odds with contending that one of the main benefits of academic research to the user partner is access to independent expertise. Perhaps the independence of researchers could be conceptualised in alternative terms, such as countering existing bias (eg. studying poverty from the perspective of the poor or countering masculine bias). Yet, the approach of favouring research from the position of the marginalized contrasts sharply with most national funding policies.
- 2.13** In light of these wide ranging issues, a number of questions need to be asked:
- What effect has the emergence of calls for greater relevancy had on the content and activities of the research of social scientists? Are government or university policies perceived by researchers as requiring substantial changes in research practice or are they more cosmetic?

- Whom do researchers see as their current users and beneficiaries and whom do they think should be their users and beneficiaries?
- What are the difficulties associated with greater user involvement? A key sub- theme is the negotiation processes surrounding users' 'needs'.
- What role do researchers believe notions such as autonomy and disinterestedness play in social science research and do they see those as being compromised by pressures for greater relevance?

It is to these questions that we will now turn.



Data and Methods

- 3.1** There are a variety of possible ways of sampling the attitudes of academic researchers concerning user relations. We could compare those who have been able to receive ESRC grants against those who have been unsuccessful, or consider those with little or no collaborative user research experience against those with a good deal of experience. This analysis takes a somewhat more limited approach by considering the attitudes of academics conducting user relevant research across a wide range of disciplines, who may or may not then have been involved in significant collaborations with users. The sample frame is the 1995(b) ESRC Business Directory. The Directory was compiled from all research projects which started in the year 1 April 1994 - 31 March 1995. Abstracts of all ESRC funded projects were submitted by researchers in the course of their investigations and a portion of these were then selected by the ESRC to be relevant to the needs of business. As such the sample is not representative of ESRC funded projects but provides a grouping of research in which user relations should be a concern. Although many of the projects address topics which might be considered classic business-related issues such as labour markets and market competition, many of the projects also consider issues beyond a narrow definition of the business-related (eg. the relation between diet and health, the use of park space, and environmental sustainability).
 - 3.2** The Directory lists 175 research projects, of which 150 projects were sent a questionnaire in late 1996. The remaining 25 projects were not surveyed because the researchers were not located in universities or the researcher(s) was known to have retired or had moved to an unknown location. Only one researcher per project received a questionnaire, this member being either the contact name, or when this was not specified, the Principal Investigator (though often these were the same individual). Of the 150 questionnaires sent out, 60 (40%) usable ones were returned. The questionnaire explored issues relating to the ESRC and other funding agencies' changing user focus (see [Annex 1](#)).
 - 3.3** These issues covered past, current, and future user relations, basic background information, and an evaluation of ESRC policy. Four demographic variables were considered: disciplines utilised, gender, position, and department (see Table 1). In terms of academic disciplines, it was decided that rather than asking respondents to single out one disciplinary approach, multiple approaches would be considered. As a result there are more than 40 references to utilised disciplines. It should also be noted that in the case of positions, as is the case for the Business Directory overall, most researchers who responded to the questionnaire occupy high level positions. As might be expected because of this focus on high level academics and the general state of academia, men considerably outnumbered women. Comparing departments versus disciplinary approach does yield some interesting points. For instance, while a considerable number of researchers employ sociological frameworks, this is not reflected proportionally in departmental location.
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Table 1: Demographics

Disciplines utilised	Department or Centre theme
22 Economics	13 Economics
21 Sociology	9 Business/Management
10 Psychology (social, psychoanalysis)	7 Sociology
6 Maths ^[2]	5 Geography
5 Political Science	4 Political Science
4 Geography	3 Public Health
3 Management	3 No answer
2 Social Policy	3 Psychology
2 Whatever is appropriate	2 Family Research
2 History	2 Science Policy
1 Political Economy	2 Social Science
1 Philosophy	1 Economic Psychology
1 Law	1 Accountancy
1 Policy Analysis	1 Inter-disciplinary group
1 No answer	1 Maths and Statistics
	1 Urban and Regional Studies
Sex	Position
49 Men	23 Professors
8 Women	10 Readers
3 No answer	9 Lecturers
	6 Senior Lecturers
	3 Research/Centre Director
	3 No answer
	2 Senior Fellow
	2 Assistant Director
	1 Head of Department
	1 Staff Tutor



The User Terrain

- 4.1** Requiring the inclusion of users within the research agenda has become standard practice in strategic and applied grant proposals. In many instances this may be little more than a cosmetic exercise or a codification of existing relationships. Therefore, it is necessary to ask some basic questions about researchers' experience, why they feel any changes were brought about because of the inclusion of users, and the perceived difficulties and benefits this brought. With regards to the first of these, 37 (74%) of those surveyed reported a significant change in the diversity of users or the nature of user involvement in the last few years, 22 (24.4%) saw no change, and 1 (1.6%) could not say. As Table 2 indicates though, the number of researchers experiencing new forms of user relations varies significantly by discipline. Most researchers portrayed these relations in terms of an intensification of the incorporation of government and industry users, with an associated shift towards more policy relevance areas.
- 4.2** The incorporation of users has taken place in the design, operation, and dissemination phases. As will be argued later, this is an important and perhaps contentious matter. In terms of dissemination though, 82% (n=31) of those who had experienced a change in user involvement over the last few years reported a change in their dissemination practices. The most common of these were writing for a popular audience and then conducting workshop/seminars with users. Only a couple of individuals mentioned the importance of

conceptualising dissemination as an integral part of the entire research process (ie. the process of researching as dissemination).

Table 2: Those Experiencing a Change in User Relations (by Disciplinary Approach)

	n	%		n	%
Economics	13/22	59	Whatever is appropriate	1/2	50
Sociology	19/21	90	History	1/2	50
Psychology	8/10	80	Political Economy	1/1	100
Maths	3/6	50	Philosophy	1/1	100
Political Science	3/5	60	Law	1/1	100
Geography	3/4	75	Policy Analysis	0/1	0
Management	0/3	0	Unknown discipline	0/1	0
Social Policy	1/2	50			

- 4.3** Two thirds of those who had experienced some change saw this related to the shifting priorities and requirements of funding agencies, particularly the ESRC. But the influence of the policies of such agencies may go even beyond this. For instance, 5 researchers felt these changes were due to a greater interest of users themselves, something which may, in part, have been brought about by the activities of Research Councils or other public agencies. In addition, three others cited major shifts in the development of their research career, two in particular mentioning a change from sociology to management departments. Only one person listed the development of professional skills as a reason for increased user interest.
- 4.4** So, it would seem that the carrot (or stick) of shifting research grant requirements does affect, at some level, research practices. Yet, did researchers perceive the ESRC as having a clear and consistent approach to *all* users? As Table 3 shows the result is mixed, though a significant percentage of those surveyed reported this was not the case. The most highly cited reason (n=8) why the ESRC policy was neither clear nor consistent was that it currently serves a narrow definition of users, rather than all those who might contribute to wealth creation and improved quality of life. Note that those that responded 'no' to this question were much more likely to have not undertaken non- academic user collaborative research projects.

Table 3: Responses to Whether the ESRC has a Clear and Consistent Approach to Involving all Types of 'Users' in their Policy Formation

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	Any non-academic user involved in collaborative research projects?			
	Overall	Yes	No	No answer
	n %	n	n	
Yes	9 15	7	1	1
No	21 35	10	11	0
Don't know	20 33	15	1	4
No answer	3 5	3	0	0
Not one approach	7 12	5	0	2

Table 4: Problems with Increased user Involvement

11 Applied shift	2 Funding constraints
8 Compromising rigour	2 Critical analysis compromised given user focus
6 Emphasis on needs of economic users	2 Red tape
5 Simplification of results necessary	2 Lack of user understanding
5 Shifting topics to those appropriate to users	2 Disinterestedness in research
4 Decreasing autonomy	1 Lack of user interest
3 Time, financial constraints	1 Public funding of private firms
2 Forces cosmetic changes in research	1 Finding users

- 4.5** What sorts of problems do researchers associate with changing user incorporation and are the perceived qualities of academic research being jeopardised? Over three quarters of the respondents cited one or more problems with changing user involvement. Roughly the same proportion of criticism came from those with and without non-academic user involved in collaborative research projects. Table 4 lists the categories of problems derived from the responses.
- 4.6** As has been argued in another survey, commissioned by the ESRC to study collaborative practice between social scientists and business (Segal Quince Wicksteed, 1992), many researchers perceive a shift in ESRC policy to favour applied research. Many of the other critical remarks listed in Table 4 do not align with the earlier mentioned caveats cited by the ESRC such as initiating collaboration, carrying out and maintaining commitment, and producing outputs. One of the most divergent points is the prominence of criticisms related to the changing substance of research given the narrow definition of 'proper' users. In a commentary on user relations, J. Webster (1994) has portrayed and criticised a movement in social science away from critical studies to business strategies aimed at promoting a smoother operation by determining those factors key to the success of business. If we aggregate the problems related to this movement (ie. emphasis on needs of economic users, shifting topics to those appropriate to users; compromising critical analysis given the user focus) we can see that this is a significant concern for many researchers. Interestingly though, over half (58%) of these criticisms came from those using sociology. In addition, a number of the problems cited are related to making research acceptable to users.
- 4.7** Given the difficulties sometimes associated with user involvement as well as the importance given to users in ESRC policy, would researchers in the future look to broaden their range of users? 37 (74%) said they would, while 23 (26%) said they would not (see Table 5). Table 6 ranks the user categories researchers will be looking to take on board. As shown, business and public bodies are at the top of listing. Given the impact of funding agencies, the narrowness of the definition of users mentioned earlier, and the sample frame, neither the desire to broaden users nor the character of those users are really so strange. In terms of how this relates to the existing set of users that researcher listed, 20 looked to get further involvement from existing types of users, while 14 looked to widen the diversity of users.

Table 5: Researcher by Disciplinary Approach who will try to Broaden Users

	n	%		n	%
Economics	17/22	77	Social Policy	1/2	50
Sociology	16/21	76	Whatever	1/2	50
Psychology	8/10	80	History	2/2	100
Maths	6/6	100	Political Economy	1/1	100
Political Science	2/5	40	Philosophy	0/1	0
Geography	4/4	100	Law	1/1	100
Management	3/3	100	Policy Analysis	0/1	0

Table 6: Cited New Users

14 Managers/Business	1 Marginalized social groups
13 Government/Public agencies	1 Academics
4 NGOs	1 Unions
3 General public	1 The law establishment
1 Economists	1 Did not specify
1 Scientists	

- 4.8** It is necessary to see the criticisms of user involvement and the ambitions for user involvement in light of the previous experience of academics in collaborative research. Of those involved in collaborative research projects, 43 (72%) had previous non-academic user involvement while 15 (25%) did not. Given the importance of users, the 25% is still rather high for a sample of research which is supposed to be user (business) relevant. Users were seen as interested in such projects primarily because they fed into the decision-making process, but also because of intellectual curiosity, an inability to carrying out research on their own, and the use of academic analysis as a mark of credibility. Note that while not all of these reasons support efforts to actively engage with users (because the research is not of significant importance), some do provide space for researchers to attempt to configuring users' needs.
- 4.9** Did researchers feel collaborative users had sufficient conception of what academics offer? 16 (37%) of those with previous collaborations said users did not, 11 (26%) responded yes, 9 (22%) thought it was mixed and the remaining three did not know. Meeting users' needs was seen as much more problematic though. 37 of the 43 (86%) researchers who were engaged in collaborative work said it was difficult to meet users' needs. The primary reasons given were the diversity of user and researchers' interests, the conflicting agendas of different users, the insistence of users on pursuing research in a particular fashion, and needs that were seldom defined at the initial stage.
- 4.10** Thus, more people said users have a sufficient conception of what academics have to offer than said meeting users needs was straightforward. Why might this be the case? Addressing this would require thinking about what is involved in meeting users' needs besides users having a sufficient conception of what academic social science research has to offer. One finding from researchers who have studied (non-social science) collaborations is that collaborative research and incorporating users' needs within research and development is a problematic process (see eg. Law, 1991). Rather than being a rational, well defined process of meeting specific needs, collaborations are better seen as processes in which goals, needs, and the criteria for quality are negotiated. If these findings could be generalised to social science orientated collaboration, the desirability of such negotiations would depend on many of the questions discussed earlier about the proper extent of user involvement. Referring back to some of the previous discussion, in light of such tensions and conflicts, we would also have to

consider what it could mean to speak of the 'independence' of researchers.



Discussion

5.1 To summarise the findings so far:

- a. The last few years have seen a significant change in user involvement for the surveyed researchers. The shifting priorities and requirements of funding bodies such as the ESRC have been an important factor in encouraging this;
- b. A variety of problems are associated with this further incorporation of users. Some of these are noted in ESRC policy, but many are unrecognised including the narrow interpretation of users;
- c. Despite the overall increased user involvement, important questions exist surrounding the process and extent of user participation in the research process. These in turn relate to the ability of researchers to meet users' needs;
- d. The future is likely to witness a further broadening of users, particularly those in business and public sector organisations.

5.2 Of course, questionnaires ([and in particular this one](#)) are rather blunt devices to measure attitudes or gauge/assess the issues addressed here. Questions about the meaning of users, of reported qualities of social science research, and the possibility of unarticulated conflicts over the social purposes of research for different academics were not explored at much length. Some questions were left deliberately vague so as to provide space for the diversity of respondents. This survey though should provide some fairly broad brush indicators. In spite of this, it should be remembered that the sample surveyed is not representative of all UK researchers. Most of the respondents were male, senior, successful at attracting ESRC funding, and utilised a particular set of disciplinary techniques. The relatively low response rate limits how representative these findings are of the surveyed academics. The purpose of this survey, however, was not to construct a representative map of academic researchers deemed relevant to business (let alone ESRC funded researchers). Instead it has raised a range of issues not acknowledged in existing policy and building on these findings has discussed what problems may arise from this. In other words, the findings are meant to be indicative rather than representative.

5.3 Although respondents sometimes agreed with the ESRC's analysis of the benefits and dangers of user collaboration, there were also clear points of discrepancy. Ultimately the incorporation of users into the research process raises fundamental questions about the meaning of relevance, the appropriateness of research methodologies, and the epistemological and political status of knowledge. Whether consciously recognised or not, these issues have implications for researchers who sign up to programmes which require them to interact with users. Obviously this paper can not give just attention to all of these concerns, instead they will be further elaborated through a examination of one point where ESRC analysis differs from the one presented here.

5.4 One of the most important points of divergence centres around the form and extent of business user involvement. While for many researchers business has been a crucial past user, remains one today, and will be so in the future, others associate problems with the importance given to it. These in turn reflect more fundamental and wide ranging debates about the proper relation and compatibility of academic and business/industry research. Along these lines [Tasker and Packman \(1993\)](#), for instance, portray a profound conflict in the values of academics and industry. Academic values are defined in terms of freedom, rigour, disinterested pursuit of knowledge, and promoting of critical thinking. Industry on the other hand promote secrecy, narrow thinking, etc. Alternatively as [Etzkowitz \(1989\)](#) points out in regard to the physical

sciences, traditional notions of what count as norms and the culture of academic science can and to some degree have changed over the last fifteen or so years. Although the process has not been unproblematic nor gone unchallenged, the pursuit of knowledge is now often treated as compatible with commercially-oriented research. Others see little or no tension in academics pursuing strongly commercial orientated goals. So, [Love \(1995\)](#) speaks of a 'virtuous circle' where financial and other benefits accrue to those who engage in such interactions. Universities and other public sector organisations are seen as having 'only one direction to follow'.

- 5.5** Given the importance attributed to business as a user and the pressures for greater user involvement, it is worthwhile asking how the ESRC conceives the relation between business and academic research. Is this conceptualised in terms of a convergence in thinking and language or a meeting of different worlds? Should business only influence the broad allocation of research funds and collaborate with academics when appropriate or intimately engage in the research process?
- 5.6** The ESRC's £3.5 million Innovation Programme investigates 'the role of innovative management in achievement of sustained improvement in the bottom line performance of commercial and industrial businesses and relevant public sector organisations' ([ESRC, 1996](#)). Innovation here takes on a wide meaning, including the creation and marketing of devices and methods of social organisation in commercial and public sector organisations. As might be expected, user involvement is a key component of this programme. Here then is a concrete case for considering how policy makers attempt to reconcile many of the tensions discussed earlier.
- 5.7** Recently, the Innovation Programme held a meeting which included academics, policy makers, as well as business users to discuss the first phase of supported projects. One of the main objectives of the gathering was to identify opportunities for encouraging academic-industry relations. The summary report of the two day meeting includes a section entitled, 'Academic- Industry Relationships: Towards a Closer Accommodation; A Debate' ([ESRC, 1996](#)). While recognising a 'communication gap' exists in light of differences between academic excellence and business relevance, the report stresses the need to get beyond this barrier through positive recommendations. A number of mechanisms are offered to reconcile commercial and academic pursuits: 'involve users in the research design and selection process (essential where the research is to be carried out in users' premises) and involve them online in the review and evaluation process, and identify brokers with clear liaison roles; make effectiveness in collaboration and dissemination as important as research quality in both the selection and evaluation process; and make greater use of staged projects to develop user interest and commitment' ([ESRC, 1996: p. 13](#)).
- 5.8** In this document then the ESRC presents a very proactive model of researcher-user interaction. Users and researchers work together in mutually defined areas of interest to derive 'testable hypotheses' so that the researcher can provide 'clearly articulated conclusions.' Such a move towards more intense user participation in the research process obviously raises important questions about time and financial constraints on researchers. This movement also raises other important questions more pertinent to the findings of this paper. Greater user involvement in research design is not necessarily a cause for concern, but given the limited scope of users, questions do arise. In terms of the discussion above, certainly this is not a call for researchers to be operating under the most diffuse set of interests. Business organisations in the sponsored research projects seem to be conceptualised as upper management. Just because this work is business relevant does not mean it has to be done for high level management; unions or worker-management groups could also be considered users, but this did not happen. The question should be asked whether this focus on a narrow set of users produce good social science or the most valuable uptake of research for wealth creation and

quality of life? In other words, can concerns over how to define accountability in terms of responding to 'societal' demands be separated from questions over accountability related to the effectiveness of research? The assumption in this reports appears to be that if some section of business defines the research agenda, then that will benefit business (in a wide sense) the most. Beyond this question though, the successful uptake of research may be affected by the focus on particular users.

- 5.9** The focus on a narrow interpretation of users is confirmed in a recent Update of the Innovation Programme (ESRC, 1997). The Update packet includes a summary of the 25 projects covered under stage 1 and 2 of the Programme. In addition to general information on the projects, researchers listed the supposed beneficiaries of their research. Table 7 lists a categorisation of the responses. We can note in this table a fairly concentrated set of beneficiaries given the wide ranging interpretation of innovation, particularly in light of how businesses are likely to be defined.

Table 7: Beneficiaries of Innovation Research

21 Collaborating firms	3 Consultants
17 The wider business community	2 Unspecified user groups
14 Other academics	1 Teams within firm
6 Public agencies	1 Trade union

- 5.10** Even if this gearing of research is not treated as a problem, such policy recommendations take account of the problems of meeting needs in a limited way. As we saw earlier, the primary reasons given for the difficulty of meeting users' needs were the diversity of user and researchers' interests; the conflicting agendas of different users; the insistence of users on pursuing research in a particular fashion; and needs that were seldom defined at the initial stage. In such circumstances it is not at all clear that these beneficiaries will derive much benefit from research. Whether or not these sort of research-user schemes can alleviate many of these difficulties or only create new ones in trying is an open question. Certainly though these schemes are not advanced with an explicit consideration of some of the most significant problems of researcher-user relations mentioned in the survey findings.



Possibilities

- 6.1** This paper then has highlighted numerous tensions in user relations, many related to notions of the qualities of social science research. Rather than advancing a particular line, this paper has considered a multiplicity of positions, each of which raises various concerns. Of course, no one best way exists for structuring research-user relations. Researchers must respond to varied local circumstances. There is a long history of collaborative efforts in the social and economic sciences as well as a history of debate over the utilisation of knowledge (eg. Heller, 1986; Klein and Eason, 1991). Certainly such experiences offer lessons for those undertaking collaborative research. The importance of the focus on users today though lies in the widescale manner in which user relations are being encouraged. As such these must be situated within the wider policy setting (eg. the importance attached to different types of users). The concerns raised here are likely to be of greater importance in the future as funding for research remains flat while demands for funds increase. In such situations, requirements of getting users on board (particularly when users are defined narrowly), could have very worrying affects on research. Attention paid to critical thinking or theoretical sophistication may suffer so as to secure long term links. In situations of conflicting users' agendas, trying to conduct research in such a way as not to offend is, to say the least, practically, intellectually, and morally a

difficult task to sustain (see [A. Webster, 1994](#)).

- 6.2 The culture of knowledge production in universities is constantly changing and user relations are part of this process. Therefore it is worth asking how stable current relations are and what sort of alternative arrangements are possible given the demand will always exist for some forms of relevance. The strategy often used by academics of disengaging from the research agendas of the state into disciplinary based agendas would not seem very viable. Over a decade ago [Blume \(1985\)](#) called for academics to respond to requests for accountability that balanced researchers' independence with social relevance and scholarly integrity with engagement. Today, at least in the UK, these issues are even more pertinent.
- 6.3 In recent years, with the growing commercialisation of university science, commentators in science and technology policy have debated the merits of attempts to make university research in science and engineering more relevant to users (ie. industry). Typically such debates feature heated discussions between those who see a need to retain academic freedom with those arguing for greater 'social' relevance. Yet, research into academic-industrial relations ([Faulkner and Senker, 1995](#)) suggests the greatest contributions to industry made by university staff are in providing a source of new knowledge and expertise in the basic skills associated with research. Rather than advocating a position whereby the research agendas of universities and industry are closely aligned, such findings indicate public policy should pay much more attention to the benefits derived from researchers pursuing goals typically associated with the advancement of knowledge.
- 6.4 While generalising these findings beyond the sectors studied is not wholly justifiable, it may be that similar dynamics exist in some areas of social studies. What users want may not be the narrow, instrumental research that some polices seem to call for (especially if users are conceived in a wide sense). In an ESRC commissioned review of its Thematic Priorities, [Webster \(1997\)](#) has compiled information on responses from various constituencies, including users (primarily those in business and policy-making circles). One theme that emerged from this consultation was that some users believed the orientation of the themes inappropriately favoured 'an integrationist approach which sought answers to how to make current social arrangements more effective and efficient rather than subject to change' ([Webster, 1997: p. 30](#)).^[3] Some criticalness or distance from the frames of reference of users then, might be more appreciated by some users.
- 6.5 Taking this line of reasoning in a somewhat different direction, instead of fixing particular notions of users' needs, [Woolgar \(1997\)](#) suggests actively constructing them. Users should be tied in early with research projects so researchers can shape (and presumably be shaped by) their needs. Thus rather than living with ascribed identities, academics should negotiate their roles. How far such negotiation can incorporate notions of critical analysis and whether it can extend to multiple users though, are important and open questions.
- 6.6 Much of current interest relating to users is tied in with notions of researcher accountability. It might be possible to alleviate some of the current inadequacies of user policies by transforming existing conceptualisations of accountability. Situating the discussions in the UK within a wider international perspective may help shed light on the incorporation of users in academic research. Researchers in Denmark have a long tradition of involving 'users' in research, albeit in a manner much different from current UK policy. From at least the 1960s, many social scientists have drawn on hermeneutical approaches in an attempt to engage in a sort of academic praxis to transform social problems into academic research orientated around users. Research problems are rarely defined solely by academics, but rely on negotiations with others over research agendas. Groups either have taken part in the research project or had their perspectives taken into account in defining research questions. This approach stems out of a desire for democratisation, to use research to advance the interests of labour, public-interest,

and marginalized groups, and in a way critical of positivist approaches. Despite this incorporation of 'users', some emphasis has been placed on attempting to bring foreign theoretical perspective to bear on particular local situations.

- 6.7** Not surprisingly, many questions raised in this paper come up given this strong tradition of user involvement. As [Munch \(1995: p. 46\)](#) states, the 'focus [pre-1990s] was very much on consequences, user-roles and communication, problems of great interest for the main co-operative partner; the unions and social movements'. In the 1990s, however, there has been a move away from research which serves particular users towards a strategy which brings a diverse range of potential users together.

The problem of the 'non-neutral' researcher in the 1990s are dealt with in a discussion of strategies for structuring research projects. Researchers are seen as a kind of 'conductor' who must see that the involved actors bring forward experiences and interests, and that these are articulated and confronted in the research scenario. The new action aims at developing democratic strategies like 'cleaner technology', 'the good work', etc.' ([Munch, 1995: p. 59](#)).

- 6.8** This wider sense of research then is a strategy which attempts to mitigate many of the tensions discussed earlier while strongly embedded in a discourse of serving users. User engagement, theoretical insight, and critical evaluation are seen as integral parts of the research process. The problem of trying to meet a variety of needs and acknowledging those needs are difficult to define/identify is mitigated through an interactive process of negotiation. Such an approach also incorporates both aspect of the 'internal' and 'external' models of the researcher-funder-user relationship discussed earlier while not reducing research to either.
- 6.9** Does the 'Danish approach' merely re-tailor the research-user interface while favouring some users over others? Can a space be found for critical inquiry when researchers have to respond to many different types of users? Can a wide range of users be all served given they have different needs? These questions can not be answered in such a brief overview. Much more could be said about this approach (see [Munch, 1995](#)). Undoubtedly, problems and tensions exist in the Danish research system which have not been addressed. In addition, in contrast to the UK, Denmark has a greater tradition of public debate and history of experimentation in the social sciences. This would have serious implications for anyone trying to bring Danish models to the UK.
- 6.10** Still, lessons can be learnt. In terms of the above mentioned Innovation Programme, for instance, we might move away from positivist-type descriptions of the benefits of social science research, which might raise false expectations because they are based on an unrealistic notion of need. We might as well look to include a wider range of users, including for instance trade unions, managers, consumers, and regulators in constructive dialogue. This would still be in the spirit of encouraging more intense user involvement, even in a way which looks to improve wealth creation and the quality of life. The point is that the user terrain offers many options and the particular terms on which researchers relate to 'users' vary.^[4]



Conclusion

- 7.1** This paper has taken a critical approach to the incorporation of non-academic users in ESRC policy, highlighting numerous issues surrounding greater emphasis on user involvement. These points are not just administrative in nature, but depend on fundamental questions about modes of conducting research that are rarely discussed. The meaning of 'relevance' and how it can be achieved are contested. As such it is necessary to examine the sense of need being portrayed (e.g., whether it is seen as constructed or self-evident) and the interests expressed

within current calls for greater user relevance and accountability. In other words, while universities and other public institutions are accountable today in a manner they were not when concerns over scientific autonomy were dominant, we need to consider to whom or how these institutions are accountable.

- 7.2 This paper has not attempted to provide answers to how user relations should develop, but rather to note some of the tensions and possibilities of 'user' relations. Given the relative infancy of the turn toward users (as it is now formulated), in the future it is likely that these issues will become more predominant as the user reference point is more embedded into practices. Researchers will have to respond to this in some fashion, and it is hoped this paper stimulates debate about the proper types of relationships between researchers, funding agencies, and the 'user' community.

 **Notes**

¹ Of course, the ESRC also funds academic researchers who comment on the collaboration process and the utilisation of research (eg. [Heller, 1986](#); [Klein and Eason, 1991](#)). This paper does not consider such analyses in detail as their link to policy in most cases is weak.


² This includes statistics and demography.

³ See [Opinion Leader Research \(1997\)](#) for a further elaboration of user responses to ESRC policy.

⁴ The ESRC has experimented with similar types of research programmes, see for instance, [Gill \(1985\)](#) for an evaluation of the Open Door scheme.

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