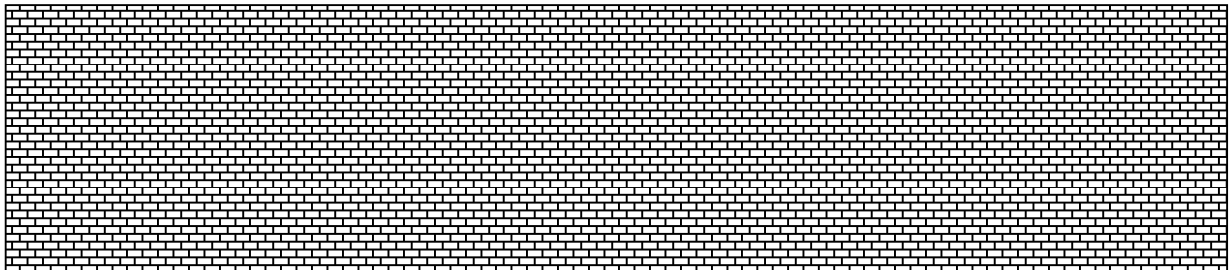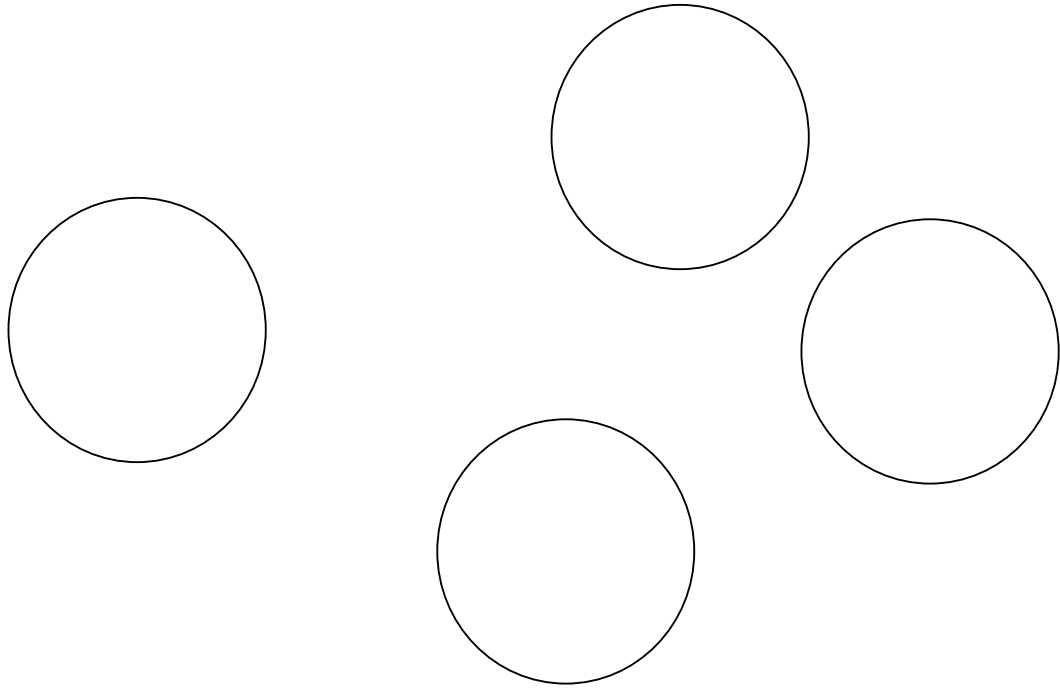# Interactive agenda setting in the social sciences

Report of a workshop held at Cosener's house, Abingdon 24-25th February 2005

Elizabeth Shove and Maureen Gardiner

Centres workshop report
Interactive agenda setting in the social sciences
Elizabeth Shove and Maureen Gardiner

Introduction

This report describes and comments on the second of six workshops on 'interactive' agenda setting in the social sciences.

Most research centres and groups claim to have distinctive goals and ambitions - it is this that explains and justifies their existence as distinctive entities set apart from the disciplines on which they draw. In examining the formulation and evolution of research agendas, the second workshop compared the experiences of six centres dealing with a variety of more and less obviously policy relevant topics. At the time of the workshop, the youngest centre was just six months old (CSG). The oldest had been going for sixteen years (HCRC).   The six centres differed in terms of institutional situation and history: at one extreme, centre-making was a matter of linking together existing interests, at the other, centres were defined by core themes around which researchers were recruited. Three of the six had been or were ESRC funded.

As planned, the workshop reviewed and compared the ways in which research centres navigated between disciplinary priorities and the ambitions of different research funders and non-academic constituencies. We talked about how centres interact with non-academic worlds at various stages in their lifecycles and we considered strategies for setting and renewing research agendas. In all of this, our definition of interaction was wide, ranging from influence to direction and including negotiation and collaboration.

The first part of the report draws together themes and issues arising from the workshop as a whole. Having considered the academic and institutional contexts in which centres exist, we go on to compare styles of agenda setting, patterns of influence and processes of innovation and renewal

The second part summarises discussion of the Oxford Internet Institute (OII); the Human Communications Research Centre (HCRC); the Centre for Research in Innovation and Competition (CRIC), the Centre for Business Relationships, Accountability, Sustainability and Society (BRASS), the Centre for Ethnicity and Citizenship and the Leverhulme programme on Migration and Citizenship, and the Centre for Society and Genomics (CSG) from the Netherlands.

Power point presentations used at the workshop are also available on the web site.

Part 1: common themes and cross-cutting threads

Environments and contexts

In the contemporary academic landscape, centres exist outside established departmental or disciplinary structures. They have distinctive social and economic characteristics - for instance in terms of who is employed within them, how careers structures work out, where the funding comes from and what this means for the kind of work they do. Most of the centres represented in the workshop aspired to be sites of inter or multi disciplinary endeavour. They could do things that could not easily - or perhaps not ever - be done within a disciplinary framework.

Perhaps because of this, their relation to mainstream departments was often a source of tension, particularly where centre membership was a matter of voluntary commitment by people also working in regular departments and subject to pressures like those associated with the RAE. As we discovered, centre agendas are shaped by academic as well as non-academic considerations and by the politics of the institutions in which they are located. On this point, it was important to notice that some centres are closer to their 'parent' institutions than others. For example, the HCRC has almost folded back into the institutions and disciplines from which it grew. By contrast, the Oxford Internet Institute is figuring out how to be a department, but not a discipline.

We also recognised the extent to which centre agendas are moulded by the histories and careers of the staff they employ. The ambitions and aspirations of founders and directors may or may not be shared by new research staff.   Somehow centre directors have to keep staff absorbed and interested: they need to let new ideas flow and they need to dissuade researchers from pursuing wayward tracks of their own. Either way, the business of attracting and retaining researchers is important for the formulation and revision of agendas. Just how important depends, again, on the history, size and institutional structure of the centre in question.

Unlike disciplines, centres are constantly called upon to explain themselves (internally and externally) and to say just what it is they do. In all cases, centre identities were the subject of continual attention. This took many forms including nurturing and cultivation as well as revision, re-negotiation and defence against unwanted incursion.   While new centres could lay claim to a new agenda, more established ones sought to take advantage of hard won experience, capacity and reputation whilst also demonstrating freshness and flexibility. As described below, path-dependencies are important. So are the qualities and characteristics of the subject matters with which centres deal. For example, questions about ethnicity and citizenship, innovation and competition, or the social and economic aspects of the internet have really very different implications for policy and practice. The landscape of surrounding non-academic concerns is varied, dynamic and relevant for what centres do and for what they might become.

From time to time we considered centres as social businesses. This allowed us to think in quasi-business terms about partnering, products and marketing.   For example, we wondered about the unintended consequences of developing new 'products' (ideas, research, insight, intelligence etc.)   that drew centres into new territory or that attracted the attention of 'unknown' non-academic audiences. Was this a good thing or a risky move? What are the processes involved in 'growing' a market in ideas? Is interest from a new quarter something to be welcomed or avoided?

As with other businesses, the practicalities of finance mattered for the types of non-academic interaction and for the styles of agenda setting in which centres engage. For example, centres with core funding from the ESRC or Leverhulme exploited the potential for leverage and negotiated with non-academic critics, friends and sponsors on very different terms to those who had no such core support. Funders also made a difference in demanding formalised processes of review, reflection and evaluation.

Styles of interactive agenda setting
Over the course of the two days we identified at least five styles of interactive agenda setting: winnowing and threshing; knitting; juggling; funnelling and lining up

the stars. Which style or styles were adopted depended, very much, upon the institutional environment in which a centre existed and on its previous history.

Winnowing and threshing
One method of developing a research centre is to identify people with apparently similar interests across a range of departments. In these cases the initial research agenda is, by necessity, built around the intellectual and human resources to hand. To go forward, and to develop a distinctive agenda involves a 'bottom up' process of organising the resulting basket of interests. Ken Peattie (BRASS) described the work involved in distilling a core agenda from the range of elements included in the original ESRC centre proposal. Second generation research questions and themes are inevitably more integrated than the first for the fact of the centre is itself important. As described, the process of winnowing out a clear, concise and convincing set of goals and ambitions was one of retrospectively classifying research activity and presenting the result in a forward-looking manner. In Ken's case, BRASS's non-academic steering group provided a critical and useful sounding board for this exercise.

Knitting
John Lee, from HCRC, described a process of knitting capacity within the centre together with new issues and problems, some of which were identified through non-academic interaction and engagement. This kind of knitting supposes that the centre 'exists', that it has a recognisable body of expertise, and that there are ways of influencing the flow of issues from theory to practice and back again. Mark Harvey, from CRIC, also described quite explicit efforts to knit intellectual fields (for example, evolutionary economics and theories of practice) together by means of theoretical exchange and development. In both cases the point is that issues and networks are built up within the entity known as 'the centre' and between it and the wider world of which it is a part. These networks reach beyond any one individual member, they develop over time and they can be deliberately cultivated.

Juggling
Annemiek Nelis (CSG) described a centre located within a complex network of institutions. The centre figures as an intermediary and as a channel for multiple interests and forces that are seeking to shape the macro agenda of the centre's parent (funding) body. Part of the job is to identify and articulate these multiple priorities - a task that puts the centre in a complicated position with respect to NGOs and other lobbying groups. The challenge is to juggle the many different demands, and at the same time visibly take responsibility for shaping, refusing and setting agendas.

Funnelling
Tariq Modood's centre for ethnicity and citizenship seeks to set agendas and to change other people's priorities and perceptions. This centre has set a course and has stuck by it. In this it refuses to be swayed by trends in academia or policy. As described, the funnelling works in both directions: issues are funnelled *into* the centre. Equally, the centre's influence is funnelled out into the wider world. This approach seems to be the opposite to Ken Peattie's method of winnowing and distilling yet both centres rely, to an extent, on persuading people from different disciplines and departments to contribute to their work.

Lining up the stars
The Oxford Internet Institute steers its course and sets its agenda by 'lining up the stars'. In practice this means scrutinising and filtering the flow of opportunities that come flooding in. Some external requests represent intrusions and distractions from

an agenda that is partly shaped by saying 'no'. Others constitute promising possibilities because they can be aligned with existing strengths and interests. Where the fit is good, new lines of enquiry are pursued, so changing the experience and capacity of institute with reference to which future 'fit' will be judged. The more the OII becomes known for doing certain things and not others, the less random the range of incoming queries and enquiries. As described, the process of filtering is at the same time one of developing an enduring but still flexible identity.

Image and influence
In thinking about *interactive* agenda setting, we need to pay attention to the other side of the equation: which non-academic interests want to engage with research agendas, and why? It was immediately clear that levels of interest varied in ways that were important for the life, times and agendas of individual centres. For example, Bill Dutton explained that many people were keen to see an internet institute at Oxford: while some were also interested in what it actually did, for others it was enough that the institute simply existed. As this instance illustrates, there are different levels at which agendas are set.

Vicki Nash reflected upon the reasons why organisations want to become involved with the Oxford Internet Institute. Ken Peattie also talked about the variety of possible forms of non-academic involvement ranging from occasional seminar attendance to co-funding, and from lending legitimacy through to specifying topics of immediate relevance.   These aspects were important when thinking about when to say 'no' and how to resist unwanted non-academic attentions. Politically it is harder to refuse some requests than others: this is potentially important for the flow of no-saying and hence for the possibility of non-academic influence. Figuring out who to disappoint and working out the costs of rejection was part of shaping a centre's identity. Turning the issue the other way around, we spent some time thinking about exactly who is invited to join centre advisory boards. Who constitutes a 'board worthy' member and what are the consequences of this judgement for the fate and future of possible research trajectories?

This was particularly significant since most felt that advisory boards were really useful in setting and promoting research agendas. What issues are fed into the academic agenda by virtue of who serves on such boards? How far would priorities change if centres appointed an entirely new cohort of advisors? Do outside participants offer generic and actually quite similar advice? In introducing these issues we approached but did not really deal with tricky questions about representation, advocacy and influence.   However, we did notice that these questions arise in different form at different moments in a centre's career.

Adrian Alsop's contribution also reminded us that there are many points at which non-academic advice filters into the academic research process. Proposals for ESRC research centres are assessed by non-academics and others are involved in mid-term reviews and evaluations. Going beyond the ESRC, we noticed that funding bodies, all of which tap into similar networks of non-academic advice, have a tendency to jump on the same topical bandwagons at the same time. Despite efforts to coordinate between funding bodies, one consequence is that certain subject areas are sometimes flooded with resources or opportunities to bid.

Similar processes happen beyond the UK with the result that national funding agencies are likely respond to developments for instance in genomics, nanotechnology or terrorism by setting up new centres and research programmes. It is not (yet) the case that research agendas are strategically divided up and allocated across Europe or around the world. On the other hand, the more informal strategy of

'playing to our strengths' is routinely adopted at every level in the system: by departments, by faculties, by universities and by research funders. This might prove to be an important mechanism in the self-organisation of the research system, but it might also generate strange patterns and consequences for the development of the academic environment as a whole.

Invention, innovation and renewal
The day to day practicalities of saying 'yes' and 'no' to external requests and of more actively courting non-academic interest reinforce reputations and thereby structure possibilities for future research. At the start of the workshop there was much talk about the dangers of being 'blown off course' and about the need to 'filter' and manage external interest. At first this sounded rather negative - as if academics knew best and as if only they could determine where the important questions really lay. Further discussion suggested that filtering and even resisting were part of a typically uncertain process of making and retaining a distinctive identity in the face of changing and often unpredictable demands. In all of this, history was critical. More established centres had become known for doing some things and not others. As internal and external path dependencies began to take effect, so new challenges arose. In particular, how to balance continuity and novelty and how to build up and exploit a track record whilst also moving on?

Whether new or established, centres were continually involved in a typically *interactive* process of shaping, stabilising and adjusting what they do and what they are known for. That said, the consequences of saying 'yes' to certain opportunities and turning others down vary at different points in the centre's life-course. In addition, projects or tasks may end up having unintended consequences. For example, Mark Harvey described one commissioned project undertaken by CRIC. To begin with, this research did not seem to fit the centre's agenda very well at all, but there were other reasons for taking it on. In the event, the process of doing the work changed what the centre took to be its core agenda. What seemed to be a marginal topic - maybe even an intrusion - has since become a key theme for future research. As Mark concluded, the business of doing research, of being a centre and of engaging with the wider world are all important in shaping new questions. After all, there is only so much you can see from your own armchair.

Some aspects of the external environment are shared by other researchers in other institutions and by potential competitors, but some are not. The comment that centres are strongly shaped by their partners and collaborators seemed to ring true. Taking this idea further, we wondered whether centres were more vulnerable, receptive or welcoming of external influence at different stages in their careers. For example, do non-academic concerns matter more when centres are being set up, when they are established or when they are under threat? More subtly, how do patterns and types of non-academic interaction develop and grow over the course of a centre's lifetime?

Age was not the only relevant consideration. The Oxford Internet Institute is, for instance, woven together from many strands of research. If one or more of these strands was to fray or give way, others would hopefully take their place and so the centre would continue. ESRC centres that have been designed, developed and conceptualised as a whole are in a rather different position. In these cases the challenge is to cultivate non-academic interest and support for an entire programme of work.

This brought us to a concluding discussion about what centres are good for and hence about how agenda setting should be conceptualised. If centres are designed

to deal with substantive areas that have a relatively long (five to ten year) but finite life they should come to an end when interest in their core topic wanes. Their continued existence depends upon the continued relevance of the subject around which they were built. That is one view. Another is that centres are important sites in which expertise accumulates and renews itself. From this perspective, centres might have an 'everlasting life' providing their agenda is theoretically engaged and providing it continues to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances. These two possibilities have very different implications for *processes* of self-reflection and for the terms and purposes of external evaluation.

Most of those who had been involved in the mid-term review of an ESRC centre acknowledged the costs but also the value of periodically taking stock of previous, present and future research directions. In other cases, the formality and frequency of this kind of stock-taking varied considerably. For example, the HCRC (which no longer has to follow ESRC procedures) has not imposed the equivalent of a mid-term review upon itself. It does not produce annual reports in quite the same way and it does not have management structures of the kind that would be required of an ESRC centre. In its current formulation, the HCRC has more non-academic interaction than it did before. Like the Oxford Internet Institute, the task of securing and retaining external funding is pretty well continuous. One consequence is that it is hard to say when 'agenda setting' or intellectual renewal actually takes place.

Toward the end of the meeting we began to wonder what a research agenda really was. Perhaps it is a set of ideas and proposals for action, perhaps it is something more. During the course of the workshop we spent some time talking about how to define 'non-academics' or 'users' and what role(s) they played in the research process, for example, as supporter, co-funder, exploiter, sounding board, critic, research subject and so forth. In addition, we were constantly reminded of the social, economic and institutional diversity of what we loosely referred to as research centres. Although all the core terms of the event ('interactive'; 'agenda setting' and 'research centre') were contested, we somehow made it to the end of the workshop without falling into total disarray. More positively, we did so because we managed to identify a range of persistently and consistently important issues relevant to 'interactive agenda setting in research centres' - whatever each of those terms might mean.

Part 2: Centres and their experiences

This part of the report is based on notes made by Maureen Gardiner and Elizabeth Shove. It summarises the experiences of each research centre in turn.

The Oxford Internet Institute: *Bill Dutton and Vicki Nash*
The Oxford Internet Institute was initiated in response to external pressure on the university, including lobbying by MPs. Its founding was facilitated by Andrew Graham, Master of Balliol and by initial funding of £10m from the Shirley Foundation (Steve Shirley being directly influential in this), and £5m from HEFCE. It now has multiple stakeholders. One result of this funding diversity is that there is no specific point at which funding ceases or is renegotiated. The OII has a rolling programme of funding renewal. From the beginning the need for active communication with a range of non-academic communities was recognised and is focused in Vicki's post.

The OII has a research driven agenda from which teaching, collaboration and networking follow. There are different routes and modes through which the OII engages with non-academic priorities and agendas.

- Stakeholder relationships are influential
- The virtual network which operates over the Web is a key mechanism
- OII's vision "Researching the social implications of the Internet" is easy for all stakeholders to understand
- OII has an entrepreneurial management style which seeks opportunities to extend the agenda constructively in response to external approaches.

The potential problem of excessive diversification is managed actively. OII has developed the concept of the issues brief – a short, sharp response to hot topics, for example, by means of a literature review, possibly involving several OII members. The idea here is to respond in a way that falls short of a fully developed project but that is also more than nothing.

Alongside this, the OII is prepared to negotiate and realign research proposals that it receives and to pass up inappropriate opportunities. The OII agenda is also shaped and sometimes limited by disciplinary and academic interests within Oxford. The only way forward is to do research recognised as excellent across a range of 'parent' disciplines. But how to do this within a small multi-disciplinary outfit that depends upon collaboration and co-operation? That remains an intellectual as well as an institutional challenge.

It was the experience of several members of the workshop that a lot of research opportunities come early in the life of a centre. Not all contribute to its strengths in the longer term. Indeed some may create tensions. Managing the organisational implications of responding to external influences and offers is an immediate challenge. Somehow fledgling centres have to differentiate between external intrusions and new opportunities and between destabilising influences and valuable new ideas.

OII aims to be responsive without changing its agenda. In this it is aided by the breadth of its founding mission which is to study the 'social aspects of the internet in policy and practice'. Although the OII started with a relatively open brief, many people were involved in setting it up. There are correspondingly many expectations about what it could and should do. Now the centre is acquiring a record and a reputation of its own, this is also (and inevitably) a record of disappointment. Bill Dutton consequently spends time explaining why the OII is not following certain research questions and why it would be strategically unwise to do so.
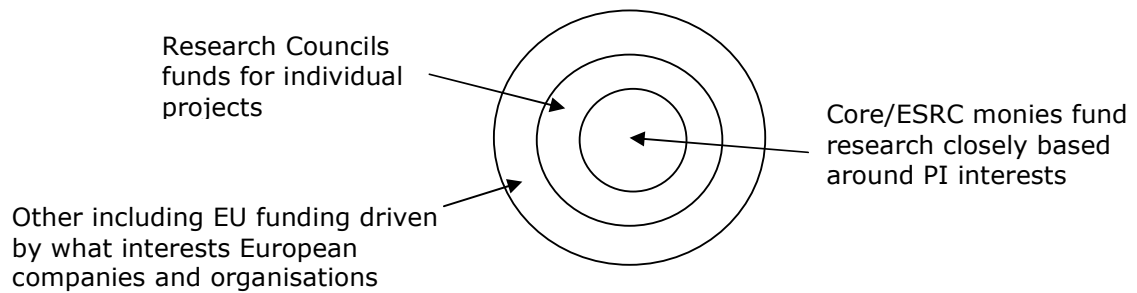
Other workshop participants pointed to the halo effect of topicality that often characterises a new centre but that tends to diminish with time. External approaches may be at a peak when the centre is least able to respond flexibly as it sets up its own research programme and builds its capabilities. These approaches may occur anywhere in the spectrum from challenging the fundamental scope of the research agenda to requests for instant briefings.

Human Communications Research Centre (HCRC): *John Lee*
The HCRC was established in 1989 with funding from the ESRC (see Greg Myer's article, 'Centering proposals'). Edinburgh's successful bid grew from an existing centre for cognitive science that dealt with language. Although ESRC funding came to an end some years ago, the HCRC is alive and well.

The HCRC now has a full time commercialisation manager and more interaction with 'users' and non-academics than ever before. Although many of the same people are involved, the centre has changed considerably over the years.

The HCRC grew and developed through acquiring and leveraging different sorts of funding - as illustrated in the diagram below.

Research Councils
funds for individual
projects

Core/ESRC monies fund
research closely based
around PI interests

Other including EU funding driven
by what interests European
companies and organisations

There was a definite pattern of wanting to keep going once the centre was set up. Since the salary bill was increasing (partly because the original principal investigators remained involved), the only option was to expand. At one time the centre had to produce around twelve proposals a month in order to maintain a sufficient flow of funding.

The HCRC has found new avenues and applications for basic research. While the applications vary, there is little doubt about what the centre works on or about what it does and does not do: it has a core agenda and a relatively well defined body of expertise.

Now that ESRC funding has finished, it is really important to attract and retain external funding. 'Glossy' presentations deliberately tailored for non-academic audiences are no longer optional. Nor do they represent a well-intentioned effort to engage with 'users' - the term 'user' is simply not used. Interaction primarily takes the form of academic involvement in addressing immediate problems often through some kind of consultancy. User interaction is not significant in setting the research agenda but it does set the application agenda. There are nonetheless instances in which consultancy-style application work has generated questions that have subsequently fed back into the 'basic' research agenda.

Without ESRC funding and without the demands associated with it, there is less concerted interaction between members of the centre. The centre has less impact on individual research agendas and there is less effort to fit these together or to present them as elements in a coherent programme of work.

Centre for Research in Innovation and Competition(CRIC): *Mark Harvey*
CRIC is just coming to the end of 10 years of ESRC funding and has recently bid for a further five years of support. In making this case, CRIC has had to define a new agenda but one that builds upon the expertise and strengths it has established over the years. Novelty and distinctiveness are important but so are track record and continuity.

Centres like CRIC gather together an increasingly competent cohort of research staff. The part these researchers play in agenda setting changes with time. To begin with research associates are the audience for and the recipients of an agenda already set by others. In time they need to see where the centre is going and they need to see their own role in it. In practice, the particular blend of interdisciplinarity and the particular sets of competence contained within CRIC today reflect the

contributions and experiences of people who have left and joined during the centre's lifetime to date.

In constructing its proposed research programme, CRIC went through a deliberate process of 'agenda setting' involving brainstorming, an away day and much discussion. For example, what are the key questions facing society today, how do we fit in the research community to which we belong? What events in the wider world connect with and shape what we do? What do researchers want to work on and how might different theoretical traditions and directions be managed and developed. Draft proposals were discussed with CRIC's advisory committee, members of which provided considered feedback.

In looking back and in looking forward CRIC considered the role and significance of its core funding. What kind of leverage has it allowed CRIC to have and what would and would not have happened otherwise? The existence of core funding is important for CRIC's response to other research opportunities, and so for defining the centre's trajectory as a whole. As noted in Part 1, the process of doing research and of engaging with research subjects has generated insights, moments of realisation and new lines of enquiry. Feedback of this kind has been continuous and critical. Equally, and as a consequence of internal and external forms of path-dependency, these processes of renewal are themselves processes that change. As Mark explained, there has been a qualitative change in the nature of CRIC's non-academic relationships over time.

Centre for Business Relationships, Accountability, Sustainability and Society (BRASS) *Ken Peattie*
BRASS had its origins in a group of researchers working on sustainability. Inspired by an ESRC call for proposals, this group looked around for others with shared interests but in different departments and disciplines. They were amazed at how many they found. The centre's first agenda was formed around topics that people were already working on - drawn together in the proposal with sustainability as the integrating banner.

BRASS's advisory committee has since played an important part as a 'critical friend', encouraging BRASS to refine and clarify its agenda and to describe what the centre does 'in a nutshell'. While the academic members of BRASS want and perhaps require diversity, external advisors and users were looking for a narrow focus. They wanted to know exactly what BRASS stood for and what it did and did not do.

Perhaps because of the centre's origins, there has been a tendency for individual projects to 'spring apart'. As director, Ken has sought to fuse different elements together through the centre. As is often the case, some members of BRASS (i.e. academics based in departments) invest more time and energy in the centre than others. All in all, it took a couple of years of working together before people began to think in an interdisciplinary way. Ken has had what he described as a sheepdog role, bringing people into the centre and distilling themes and super themes out of their work. The super-themes currently include:

- Sustainable consumption and production
- Responsible management thinking
- Socio-environmental impacts of business.

Ken identified a range of ways in which BRASS interacts with non-academics who variously figure as one or more of the following: partners, sponsors, customers, critics, research subjects, advisors, competitors and audiences.

BRASS's non-academic constituencies (including the food industry, electronics and the car industry) have been important in shaping the centre's proposed agenda (formulated as part of its mid-term review), but so has BRASS's sense of the ESRC's current priorities.

Centre for Ethnicity and Citizenship and Leverhulme Programme on Migration and Citizenship: *Tariq Modood*

Tariq was employed by Bristol University to found the centre for Ethnicity and Citizenship. This was part of a university strategy to improve the Sociology department's research rating. Although the university supported Tariq's post, the department itself had very limited resources (also a consequence of its RAE rating). All initiatives required Tariq's direct involvement and it was understandably difficult to persuade people to change their research interests in line with those of the centre. As this experience illustrates, centres can be seen in very different ways by vice chancellors, parent departments and academic colleagues.

When the chance came to make a centre bid to the ESRC it was clear that Bristol could not go alone. Although Tariq identified potential collaborators at UCL, UCL managers were unwilling to support a joint ESRC proposal (at the time, UCL economics was putting in a proposal of its own). Tariq and his UCL colleagues were, however, able to submit a successful but somewhat smaller scale proposal to the Leverhume Trust.

The centre for ethnicity and citizenship has a high profile in the media and is very well networked. The centre aims to make a difference and to set agendas. In order to do this, Tariq argues that it is necessary to set a course and stick by it: 'be clear in your own mind and do it'. This represents a particular way of thinking about interactive agenda setting. In this case the challenge is to influence and change other people's perceptions and priorities, including those of research funders. By way of example, some of Tariq's colleagues in Education had been to the DfES and explained that more should be done to understand the experience of mixed race school children. The DfES responded positively and research contracts have followed.

In practice, the centre consists of people mostly working on topics in which they were already interested. The fact of the centre is, however, important in making these topics visible and in helping to influence if not set national agendas.

Centre for Society and Genomics(CSG) *Annamiek Nelis*
In 2000 the Dutch government decided to launch an initiative, funded by five ministries, to make the Netherlands a key player in genomics. The result was the Genomics Initiative and E300m with which to fund the genomics infrastructure.

There are five centres of excellence in the areas of cancer, plants, industry and medicine, as well as society (CSG), all funded for four years. All involve industry, user and university collaboration.

The initial proposal for CSG was for a network focusing on ethical and social aspects and involving all universities. This was agreed by government but opposed by the other centres, and in a year of negotiation was nearly abandoned. The CSG ended up as a centre one role of which was to define a programme of work and call for proposals from across the Netherlands. In the first phase of the Initiative the science

centres were established ahead of the CSG. The CSG is now perceived to be at the core of agenda setting for the second phase.

CSG has multiple roles, including overseeing the communications interface with other centres. Communication and education are to be part of every project. Explicit interactive relationships with non-academic groups are also required.

CSG is working on a bid for the next phase of genomics initiative activity and is doing this with the help of an unusual panel of non-academic participants. The idea here is to include creative people from the arts, literature, science and farming. In this role, the centre figures as an intermediary and as a channel for multiple interests and forces seeking to shape the macro agenda of the centre's parent (funding) body. This puts the centre in a complicated position with respect to NGOs and other lobbying groups. In managing the agenda setting process, the centre is located somewhere in the middle of a web of interests, many of which pull in different directions.

A view from the ESRC: *Adrian Alsop*

Adrian notices that the relative influence of academic and non-academic priorities is cyclical. When resources are limited the extent of 'responsive' funding tends to increase. Recent consultation with 150 'stakeholders' including academics and non-academics led to the following observations: that ESRC research needs to be more international, more regional, have more funding from and with other organisations, and be more joined up internally.

More generally, the view is that centres are good for capacity building, infrastructure maintenance and for issues that last ten years. While programmes are multi-disciplinary, centres have the potential to be interdisciplinary. This is particularly important given the problems that the RAE creates for developing and promoting interdisciplinary research.

Centre agendas are currently 'set' for five years at a time. If centres are to be more responsive, they need some flexibility in revising work programmes to take account of new non-academic concerns and of events in the wider world. This means designing a correspondingly flexible evaluation process.

More ambitiously, ESRC procedures might be designed to influence processes of interactive agenda setting. Advisory boards and mid-term reviews are clearly important. However, there may be other ways of thinking about the day to day business of intellectual renewal. As this report shows, the relation between a research centre and its research agenda is inherently dynamic.