

Sustaining a National Treasure (JG, for a House of Lords Lunch, June 11 2014)

Essex University is the only one of the pre-1980s UK universities that has all of its best departments in the social sciences. In the first ever Research Assessment exercise in the mid-1980s, Essex' Economics, Government and Sociology Departments all came out as best-in-the-country. Essex characteristically decided to plough back part of the resulting extra funding directly to make sure Essex kept its social science edge.

David Rose from Essex' Sociology Department. Tony Shorrocks from Economics, and Ivor Crewe from Government¹ cast around the world for new ideas. And thus emerged the germ of what eventually became the British Household Panel Survey. They went for funding for an Interdisciplinary Research Centre funded by the Advisory Board for the Research Councils, the ABRC—IRC's were Mrs Thatcher's own initiative, she must have been....bemused.....by this use of funding that she'd thought of as being for atom smashers and space rockets and ice-breakers, for a big social survey—investigating something she'd recently claimed *didn't exist*. The rumour at the time was that she'd been convinced by Mrs Gorbachev, wife of the Russian President, herself a sociologist, to let the social scientists compete. Anyway, once the IRC for Micro-social Change was agreed, Essex University put *more* resources into the work.

First it provided funds, not the BHPS itself, but for what made the BHPS so successful, the immensely careful and labour-intensive work on data cleaning, documentation, meta-data, all the invisible bits that lie behind a successful empirical study – that make all the difference in the production of a world beating data resource. And *then*, once the first couple of waves of data were out and the production process had settled in, Essex switched its money to pay for three full professors—initially John Ermisch, Stephen Jenkins, Alison Booth, all of them real

¹ Funding for this also came from Unilever's Research Division. Note: **not** the Leverhulme Foundation: Unilever at this time had an enlightened view of the contribution that social science research could make to shaping its own R&D strategy. Their research director Liz Carter had a substantial programme of research into household behavior—and reported directly to the Unilever Main Board. Unilever paid for and the late and greatly missed Professor Ray Pahl, seconded to Essex for this purpose from Kent, to work with and Tony on emerging issues in household research.

stars—whose responsibilities were *entirely* to provide leadership in the use of the dataset in international-level publications. This, when you consider the small size of Essex in those days, was a level of investment in pure research proportionately much larger than anything found, for example, in the Russell Group. And this level of investment has persisted throughout the 25 years of ISER's existence.

The main funding, over the years, has been from the ESRC. I must say that in the stringencies of the first half of the 1990s, my own experience of the ESRC was not universally positive. There were those in the ESRC, around 1993, after 4 years of investment, once the first wave of BHPS data emerged, who threatened to close the project down for lack of publication output—despite the fact that with just one wave of data available we had exactly 50% of the absolute minimum of material required for longitudinal analysis!

But by the mid-1990s, once the ESRC realized what serious stuff was going on in Colchester, its attitude changed. Yes, we had to compete—with no guarantee of success—for each successive 5-year tranche of funding. But, the point I'd draw attention to is that those five year tranches were *available to be competed for*. And then, in the new Millennium, the ESRC Chief Executive Ian Diamond won us access to the general UK scientific research Capital Funds—which meant we could compete for the enormous resources that now support Understanding Society—that splendid super-BHPS that is the world leader among Panel Studies—bigger and much better than the now outmoded US PSID, the German SOEP, the Australian HILDA study.

Worldwide, more than 1500 users of this dataset. Hundreds of academic articles. Continuous confident deployment by the Office of National Statistics, by Eurostat, many other Government and Intergovernmental Agencies. It's a world beater. BUT.....there's always a challenge. Just last week ISR, Michigan University the home of the PSID, ran a large conference in Washington, discussing a new US Household Panel Study. Their current name for the study isUnderstanding America! It's a tribute.... and potentially, in scientific leadership terms, a challenge.

ISER is a national treasure. But it hasn't come about by accident. Understanding society is the product of pretty much three decades of purposeful hard work, and of sustained **investment**, by academics, by the University of Essex, by the ESRC. And to continue a world beater, there's no alternative. Continue the investment.