DECEMBER:2022

SOCIAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

research matters

New apprenticeship scheme for social researchers

A group of research organisations has started the process of setting up an apprenticeship scheme for people looking to work in social research. The proposal to develop a level 6 apprenticeship scheme was initiated by GSR (Government Social Research, the umbrella body for social researchers in central government) but it is designed to create career opportunities across the social research sector. The 'Trailblazer Group' that's working with the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) to guide development has representation from across the social research sector, with employers in central government, research agencies and institutes, including Department for Work and Pensions, HMRC, Office for National Statistics, Department for Education, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Defence, Home Office, NatCen, Kantar Public, Ipsos UK, IFF Research, Basis Research, Institute for Employment Studies, plus the SRA and MRS.

We spoke to Brian O'Callaghan, head of profession for social research at HMRC, who co-chairs the Trailblazer Group with Ben Humberstone of Kantar Public.

Who are you hoping will be attracted to the apprenticeship scheme?

We want to open a new route into a career in social research to complement the pathways that already exist. We hope this new opportunity to study for a degree while working and gaining experience of research in practice will appeal to a wide range of people interested in working in social research. We want people who successfully complete the apprenticeship to build on that and continue to develop their careers in research, with no barriers to them taking on additional responsibility in leading more challenging research projects and management roles within their organisations.

How will it improve diversity and inclusion in our sector?

There is a lot of shared interest from Trailblazer Group employers in the potential of an apprenticeship to support efforts to attract a wider range of people and increase the diversity of the social research workforce. Attracting people from diverse backgrounds is a key part of efforts to improve diversity and inclusion in research. In central government GSR has a Diversity and Inclusion Strategy. This recognises that the goal of putting people and society-centred research, advice and design at the heart of government decision-making requires the profession to bring diverse perspectives to thinking and to be inclusive of the population as a whole. There is a lot of common ground with the 2021 research by the Young Foundation for the SRA into experiences of diversity and inclusion among UK social researchers. This is helping organisations and individuals reflect on how they can work collaboratively to ensure that diverse talents in research are included, recognised and rewarded, and that social research practice is as inclusive as it can be.

When do you hope to launch the scheme?

We hope to have the first apprentices starting in September 2024.

Will it also help smaller employers of researchers?

Yes, we want the scheme to be relevant to employers of all sizes. The Trailblazer Group includes a mix of employers so that we design a scheme that works for everyone.

What needs to happen before the scheme is approved?

The Trailblazer Group submitted an occupational proposal for a social research apprenticeship in November. In January 2023 IfATE will advise whether the occupation meets the requirements for development as an apprenticeship.

If IfATE agrees the occupation proposal, the Trailblazer Group will move on to the next stage of the apprenticeship by submitting an occupational standard and end-point assessment (EPA) plan and gathering evidence to inform the IfATE funding-band recommendation. The next stage is due for submission in March 2023.

If the apprenticeship standard is approved, then employers will begin activity to implement it including partnering with a learning provider; marketing the apprenticeship to generate interest from all groups in the population; and selecting and recruiting apprentices.

To find out more, see consultation on social research apprenticeship.

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Only connect

Ailbhe McNabola, SRA co-chair, previews this issue and looks forward to 2023 and the chance to reconnect with friends and colleagues, old and new

Welcome to this quarter's Research Matters. I'm delighted to see progress in developing an apprenticeship for social research, and the cross-sector collaboration that is supporting this. Attracting people from diverse backgrounds is a key part of efforts to improve diversity and inclusion in research, and an apprenticeship has the potential to enable a wider range of people to enter the social research workforce. At the SRA we'll be supporting this initiative, and we look forward to seeing it launch.

Research Matters always focuses on methods – sharing advice and best practice for the more familiar methods, and getting under the bonnet of some newer or more experimental approaches. In this edition, Laura Robertson takes us through her use of community-led action research in Scotland, highlighting aspects to be aware of to get the most out of this approach. We hear about how the use of data is encouraging change in philanthropy. Yusra Ali and Tracey Agyeman of Funders for Race Equality Alliance, which aims to increase sustainable and flexible funding for Black and Minoritised-led organisations, share their experience of working with funders to view their funding through a racial justice lens, using the alliance's racial justice audit tool. And N Graham Hughes, former SRA trustee board member, shares his views on MAXQDA, a tool for qualitative data analysis.

We hear from the Office for National Statistics about Census 2021, a hugely successful iteration of the national census, and about future plans for population statistics – including developing a new dynamic population model to produce timely population estimates at national and local authority levels. And on the topic of asking questions of the general public, many readers will have been aware of the recent government consultation that purported to 'explore the appetite of businesses and consumers to buy and sell in imperial units'. Radio 4's More or Less picked up on this consultation, speaking to the SRA's longstanding trainer in questionnaire design skills, Pam Campanelli. As Pam pointed out on the programme, all was not well with the questions being asked. Patten Smith explains the shortcomings.

Research Matters always focuses on methods – sharing advice and best practice for the more familiar methods, and getting under the bonnet of some newer or more experimental approaches

As ever, we have a few perspectives on working in social research. In our regular 'research hinterlands' slot we hear from Andy Curtis, acting head of evidence and learning at the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, about his interests outside his day job, and how he came to work in social research.

Laura Pearce, principal research officer at the Ministry of Justice, takes us through her experience of working across several government departments as a member of the government social research profession, procuring and managing external research and evaluations. She shares her advice for those looking to procure social research within government, and those who bid for government social research projects. And also on procurement, Richard Self, head of research, monitoring and evaluation, Welsh Government/Welsh European Funding Office sets out what he looks for in a good supplier response to an invitation to tender.

In SRA news: our staff team has grown over the summer and Tom Yeadon, our new operations manager, introduces himself and talks about his ambitions for the SRA. And we salute two trustees retiring in December who have both given the full six years of service: Nigel Meager and Isabella Pereira. Their energy and wisdom will be much missed on the board.

Last but not least, we are truly delighted to share the news that the SRA in-person conference is back. Mark your diaries for Thursday 15 June, at the Royal College of Physicians, London NW1. It is now four years since we last got together in person, so we are greatly looking forward to connecting again with friends and colleagues, old and new.

I hope you enjoy this edition of Research Matters. Keep an eye out for the latest news on events and activities on our website.

Research is a journey: travel it well

By N Graham Hughes, former trustee and treasurer of the SRA, now mainly retired

For the last ten years I have been demonstrating and teaching the use of MAXQDA software for the analysis of qualitative data. I have travelled to deliver face-to-face training in Europe and the USA, but gradually the mode has switched to online and webinars, and I now regularly find myself talking to people all around the world. I am frequently struck by the enthusiasm with which researchers take to this program as it helps them to deliver good results. But I am also disappointed by the lack of take-up here in the UK. It concerns me that, in the field of qualitative research, we are in danger of being left behind as the rest of the world discovers a great toolkit, while we struggle with working the way we have always done.

Starting to use MAXQDA is like acquiring a new kitchen where everything is placed most conveniently. You reach without looking and your hand finds the implement that you need: there is no bending down to the oven or walking miles to the fridge. This program has been carefully designed, with feedback from its users over the years, so that you don't need to think about how to drive it, and that leaves most of your brainpower for thinking about your data and research questions.

In the last year I have run online training for people working at two international organisations for which considerable effort was put into choosing the best program for the tasks in hand. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change has teams of people processing document submissions from almost every country in the world, a huge task of qualitative analysis, and they chose MAXQDA for this. The International Accounting Standards Board chose it to help it process the large number of documents that it receives as it tries to establish global rules for financial reporting. These are serious people doing important work, and they made their selections thoughtfully.

What, I ask, is the problem here? Does nobody evaluate the software purchased by our institutions?

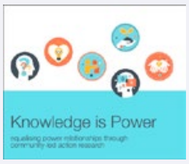
Meanwhile, last year I noticed that several students at one Russell Group university had attended my regular webinar about starting with MAXQDA, so I emailed one and asked if someone had been recommending it at their institution. Nobody had. It was just that, frustrated by the program provided, they had searched for something better even at personal expense. I asked if they would introduce me to their supervisor, and I offered to deliver a free workshop for as many students as might be interested. Sadly, nothing came of this.

I have staffed a trade stand at several academic conferences in the UK, including the SRA's. I met with polite interest, some people even watched a brief demonstration, but it sparked no significant change. I was approached for some training by someone from Holland who had seen me at a UK conference, but nobody in a UK academic institution did that.

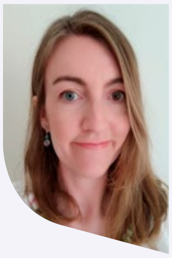
What, I ask, is the problem here? Does nobody evaluate the software purchased by our institutions? Is it just that decision-makers can rely on the comfort of using what was used last year, over and over again?

May I emphasise that I am not a sales rep nor am I paid any commission. I am just trying to get an excellent program into use here in order to improve the quality of research analysis in the UK. This should be a concern for everyone in our community because, if research students are left with difficult software, it will affect their expectations of subsequent work. If anyone at a UK university is interested, can I suggest you do a couple of simple things? Please talk to PhD students, who might be using text, audio, video or photographic data in their research, about their experience of computer assistance and the software provided for them. Secondly, please do a little quantitative research to identify how many people in your institution actually use the program provided through a site licence – you might find that it represents poor value for money if few people use it regularly.

Knowledge is Power: supporting communities to make change through action research



By Laura Robertson, senior research officer, Poverty Alliance



Knowledge is Power, a programme supporting community-led action research in Scotland between 2019 and 2022, has supported nine community-led action research projects to conduct research that mattered to them. Community-led action research is where the community decides on the issue to be researched, designs and carries out the research, and makes use of the results to achieve positive change. This article describes the programme and gives some pointers to others who are supporting, or who intend to support, community-led action research. There's more about the programme on the Knowledge is Power website.

Over two years, the Scottish Community Development Centre and the Poverty Alliance provided one-to-one support to groups and organisations to support change in their communities, shifting power to people in communities by putting community members at the centre of the research process.

The Knowledge is Power programme had five key elements:

1. Developing an online toolkit for community researchers drawing on existing resources and on needs identified by the programme team. The toolkit contains resources for planning, methods and action.
2. Developing an application process and criteria: the programme team developed criteria to assess applications to ensure that support was directed at groups which were best suited to participate. Groups had to be able to show that they were community-led, had capacity to undertake a community-led action research project, and that the research aimed to improve outcomes and provide positive benefit to the whole community. We also developed a guide for applicants and answers to frequently asked questions.
3. Training and on site support: we ran an in-person training day at the beginning of the programme covering the principles and values of community-led action research, setting research questions, exploring research methods (traditional and non-traditional), collating and analysing findings, and taking action. Due to the pandemic, we mainly provided support through online meetings. We also provided community groups/organisations with support costs which they used in a variety of ways, for example, to develop easy-read versions of surveys and online campaign videos.
4. Creating a cross-sector community-led action research alliance: we brought together a group of expert representatives to advise on developing the toolkit and the programme.
5. Capturing learning and shaping future developments: two shared learning sessions took place during the programme. A final shared learning and celebration event brought together projects and others with an interest in community-led action research.

The pandemic affected the programme, with many organisations having to change the focus, depth or activities relating to their projects. Through a final learning event and case studies, the programme shared the impact of projects in local communities including raising awareness of issues and supporting community organisations to apply for funding. We've learned that involvement has led to increased skills and confidence and community empowerment, and that research which is community-led provides unique and rich experiences through lived experience.

For anyone involved in supporting communities to conduct their own research, learning from Knowledge is Power indicates that there are three critical factors:

1. Continued support from an experienced researcher.
2. Someone with capacity to oversee the development of a project from start to finish.
3. Training on ethics and safeguarding in research, particularly when the focus is on sensitive issues.

Knowledge is Power was funded by the Scottish Government and the National Lottery Community Fund. The toolkit and more information are on the Knowledge is Power website.

How data is driving racial justice in philanthropy

By Yusra Ali, programme officer, and Tracey Agyeman, head of programme, Funders for Race Equality Alliance

What impact has data had on increasing funding for Black and Minoritised-led organisations and in tackling racial injustice?

Established in 2015, the Funders for Race Equality Alliance is a growing network of charitable funders determined to address racial inequity and injustice in the UK. The network provides a critical space for challenge, knowledge exchange, peer support and action.

One of the alliance's key aims is to increase sustainable and flexible funding for Black and Minoritised-led organisations. To do this, we need to be able to track what type of funding reaches Black and Minoritised-led organisations. Our racial justice audit tool gives funders a snapshot of their current portfolio through a racial justice lens, and provides greater transparency of current foundation expenditure. It acts as a baseline against which to measure progress and ensure the sustainably funding of the race equality sector.

When completing the audit, funders analyse their portfolios in four dimensions:

1. The proportion of funding going to organisations led by people experiencing racial injustice.
2. The extent to which funded projects are designed to meet the needs of communities experiencing racial injustice.
3. The type of work funded (for example service provision, campaigning, research).
4. Whether funding for racial injustice work is intended to address the root causes or its consequences.

This has adapted over the years, with the refining of definitions and the integration of 360Giving's new Data, Equity and Inclusion Data Standard, ensuring the audit stays fit for purpose.

Our 2022 cohort results

This year we released our third cohort of results, analysing data from 1,003 grants, with a total £85.1m from 15 members – our highest engagement yet from funders. Our audit protects individual data and helps funders interpret it so that they can better understand their trends and develop strategies to address their gaps. As an alliance, we understand that funders come from different starting points and may collect different, or little, data. Our audit supports funders to collect the necessary data to develop more targeted funding.

The key findings from this year's cohort are:

- 46% of grants audited went on projects benefiting communities with experience of racial injustice, an increase in comparison to previous cohorts
- although funding has increased, the vast majority of this increase has gone to larger generalist race equality organisations, with a seemingly minimal increase in funding to organisations that have been structurally underfunded and continue to be so
- over a quarter of grants were designed to address the root causes of racial injustice – a large increase from previous cohorts (4.27% to 25.5%)
- although our definition of an organisation being led by people experiencing racial inequity has increased from 50% to 75% of staff, there has been a significant increase in organisations that are 'led by' from 6.3% to 28.4%

Applying the data to make changes

Many funders have implemented changes from the previous year's results. Below are some examples of how funders, from past and present cohorts, are working hard to make racial justice a priority in philanthropy:

- Lloyds Bank Foundation has used the audit tool to refine its data collection, categorising active grants to analyse the success rates of Black and Minoritised-led charities applying for funding. The evidence from this has indicated a need to prioritise Black and Minoritised-led charities, with the introduction of a 25% ringfenced fund in August 2020.
- The Smallwood Trust has used the audit to review its funding portfolio, which led it to increase funding to Black and Minoritised-led groups from 3% to 21% since 2020.
- Bedfordshire and Luton Community Foundation has noticed that its use of short-term grants meant that only 25% of its grants was able to address the symptoms or root causes of racial inequality. It hopes to tackle this gap by creating more opportunities for longer-term funding.

The impact of the audit has been felt, but there is still a lot more work to do. We encourage all funders (including non-members of the alliance) to complete our audit. Our audit is a key step to increasing more transparent and impactful approaches to data and race equality funding.

Brexit and the return of imperialism

By Patten Smith, senior consultant, Ipsos

Between 3 June and 26 August, the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) ran a consultation titled 'Choice on units of measurement: markings and sales'. The motive behind this was declared openly in section 2 of the consultation document (titled 'Brexit opportunities') in which it was stated that 'the UK's exit from the EU has created an opportunity …to take back control of our measurement system so that it better reflects the needs of British businesses and consumers'.

Although this wording suggested that BEIS felt it already 'knew' that the current measurement system failed to fully meet business and consumer needs, it decided to run a consultation to 'explore the appetite of businesses and consumers to buy and sell in imperial units… … [and to explore] whether there should be a requirement for the equivalent metric measurement to appear alongside the imperial measurement where imperial units are used'.

A consultation differs from social research of course, and perhaps I should not be writing about one in a magazine devoted to the latter. However, before concluding that social research skills do not apply to consultations, it is worth comparing consultations to the nearest social research equivalents: attitude surveys.

Attitude surveys attempt to compile reliable statistics on populations' opinions by collecting accurate information on attitudes from representative samples. In contrast, consultations are designed simply to record the views of those who feel strongly enough to voice them – they have no requirement for representativeness. *However*, just like attitude surveys, consultations *do* require views to be recorded accurately. Any 'consultation' that failed to accurately record the views of those responding would only hear what it wanted to hear, and, as such, would fail to consult in any meaningful way. And if it failed to consult, it could not be meaningfully called a consultation!

Back to BEIS and Brexit opportunities, and specifically how the consultation set out to 'explore the appetite of … consumers to buy and sell in imperial units…'. The key question was worded as follows:

'If you had a choice, would you want to purchase items:

(i) in imperial units?

(ii) in imperial units alongside a metric equivalent?'

As the SRA's longstanding trainer in questionnaire design skills, Pam Campanelli, pointed out on the Radio 4 'More or Less' programme, this question spectacularly fails as a question, because it does not offer an exhaustive set of answer categories. What do you do if you only think metric (like most young adults), and, when buying your (British-grown?) runner beans, you really *do not want* to be bamboozled by incomprehensible signage about lbs and oz? There is no answer code to fit your opinion, and you are therefore disqualified from expressing it.

Attitude surveys attempt to compile reliable statistics on populations' opinions by collecting accurate information on attitudes from representative samples. In contrast, consultations are designed simply to record the views of those who feel strongly enough to voice them

The question does indeed 'explore the appetite' of some consumers – those who want to buy and sell in imperial units – but fails completely to record the views of those who prefer to remain metric. The 'consultation' therefore failed to consult and was no consultation at all.

But perhaps nothing was lost – as mentioned above, the authors of the consultation document apparently already 'knew' that reintroducing imperial measures would better reflect the needs of British businesses. So, if they were right, a *real* consultation would not have been needed anyway!

Do social researchers emerge fully formed? Do they have any other life for that matter? In this series, we check out the back stories of some of our social research colleagues. What's your hinterland? Do you have an interesting story to tell? Let us know!

Research hinterlands

By Andy Curtis, acting head of evidence and learning, Paul Hamlyn Foundation

Mudlarking on the Thames

These days mudlarking tends to be a hobby conducted by both professional and amateur archaeologists. They take advantage of the Thames' tidal nature, which sees the low tide leaving a host of artefacts in its wake on the foreshore twice a day. These include pint glasses thrown in by drunken revellers the night before, as well as objects untouched for hundreds, sometimes thousands, of years. No two low tides are the same in what they reveal.

I started mudlarking in 2020, just before the first Covid-19 lockdown. I usually do it once a week depending on the light, weather and tide times. I think the first thing that strikes you when you climb down to the foreshore (by steps or by a precarious, rusting ladder) are the remarkable views from the perspective down below the city. While you need a licence from the Port of London Authority to mudlark, anyone is allowed to walk along most of the foreshore.

History of mudlarking

The term 'mudlark' goes back many centuries, originally meaning busking, but became more prominent in Victorian times, being used by Dickens in *Our Mutual Friend* and in the work of proto-social researcher Henry Mayhew. For them, mudlarks were the dispossessed, often children, left to scavenge in the Thames for goods, such as coal, that had fallen off the various boats that chaotically crammed the river. The water was filthy: sewage was disposed directly into the Thames untreated then (and alas, still does now on occasion).

What is the most exciting thing you have found?

It is a common question to ask mudlarks what they have found. I was initially drawn to mudlarking by Lara Maiklem's bestselling book on the subject,[1] but I have yet to find the more unusual objects Maiklem and other prominent mudlarks have found. That does not mean I have come away empty-handed. Most mudlarking finds, as Maiklem emphasises, are the legacies of ordinary people, not kings and queens. Commonplace objects of days gone by have been made remarkable only by the passage of time. The objects found are often partial, battered by thousands of tides, opposed to a complete artefact. Ted Sandling writes eloquently about the value and beauty of such fragments, which take on a different aesthetic value by providing just a glimpse of a larger object and a lost past.[2]

Indeed, my home is littered with the rubbish of times past: musket balls (possibly from the English civil war), Victorian marbles, inkwells, 'pipkin handles' from post-medieval cooking pots, and, of course, clay tobacco pipes. I remember my grandfather digging up such pipes in his garden in Hampshire, and the foreshore is scattered with endless pipe stems and, less frequently, pipe bowls. The best thing about pipe bowls, apart from their intrinsic beauty, is that they are relatively easy to date. Basically, the smaller they are, the older they are, because tobacco became less expensive over time. The bowls became larger, and by the Victorian period, more decorative.

A busman's holiday?

When you are a researcher and so much of your work is text-based and desk-bound like mine is these days, it makes a change to do a different activity and get out in the fresh (well almost fresh) air. I am always fascinated by the hinterland series in *Research Matters* and how far the activity falls from the day job. I hope mine does differ significantly, but is this truly the case? Being a hobby with an academic discipline attached to it, I find myself reading texts on the subject. Not quite peer-reviewed journals, but popular works with varying degrees of complexity. Even walking along the foreshore in a meditative state, the part of the brain I use for research is not fully switched off. Is this just about having a critical mind? I do wonder whether this hobby is far enough removed from the day job to qualify as a hinterland at all, but perhaps this does not ultimately matter.

1 Maiklem, L. (2019). *Mudlarking: lost and found on the River Thames*. Bloomsbury.

2 Sandling, T. (2016). *London in fragments: a mudlark's treasures*. Frances Lincoln.

PROCUREMENT

Procuring government social research

By Laura Pearce, principal research officer, Ministry of Justice

Over the past six years I've worked across several government departments as a member of the government social research profession. Each role has involved procuring and managing external research and evaluations. Each project is unique, with its own set of challenges and rewards. In this article I set out some advice for those looking to procure social research within government, and those who bid for government social research projects.

Routes available for procuring social research

Crown Commercial Services (CCS) offers various frameworks to purchase services from external providers, ensuring compliance with public procurement regulations. This includes the research and insights framework, and the low value purchase system framework. These frameworks can be used to procure research via mini-competition or direct award. It's also possible to procure via open competition on contracts finder and through direct award off-framework, under specific circumstances.

Identifying the procurement route

Identifying the most suitable procurement route is the first challenge for government social researchers. The selected route depends on many considerations including resource availability, project scope, budget, timeline and the expertise required. Government social researchers may need to go through different internal teams, requiring different paperwork and clearances for each route. Processes can differ across departments and change over time: navigating them can take longer than expected. My advice to government researchers is to look for any departmental procurement guidance for researchers, to ask colleagues with recent procurement experience for advice and tips, and to speak to your commercial colleagues as early as possible. At the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), we also have an analytical procurement group, which I'm part of. The group has produced internal procurement guidance for analysts, and we have regular catchups with our commercial colleagues to facilitate information sharing. If you are working in government social research and your department doesn't have one, why not look into setting one up.

Specifying realistic requirements

Government social researchers strive to design and deliver the most robust and ethical research possible, while considering policy context and stakeholder needs. Policies and evaluations often need to be designed at speed, there may be a lack of data to shape the design, funding may be allocated to specific timeframes or tasks, and research outputs may need to be delivered before medium- to long-term benefits can be realised. The commissioning social researcher has to carefully balance these factors to ensure specifications are achievable and will lead to quality evidence which can be used to shape future policy. Commissioners need to ensure they build reasonable timelines into their specifications and are not asking more than a bidder could achieve within the specified budget.

Unrealistic specifications may lead to a lack of bids, or issues later in the project lifecycle. Commissioners should also take care to manage stakeholder expectations. I have found it useful to have examples of previous projects to help guide early discussions with stakeholders.

Advice for bidders

Suppliers can join CCS frameworks at any time, using the CCS website. Each framework requires separate registration. Suppliers can only bid against a released invitation to tender (ITT) if they are already registered on that framework when the ITT is launched. Bidders should ensure they are registered on each framework they may wish to use for securing future contracts, and that they know who their organisation's contact is to receive system alerts.

When responding to ITTs, bidders should focus on the requirements, taking care to factor in any key delivery dates, available budgets, or methodological preferences indicated by the commissioners. If the specification provides an option for bidders to propose their own methods or alternative approaches, bidders should provide evidence to support the rationale for their proposed design. This could include response rates previously achieved with the same approach, or examples where the approach has previously been used successfully by the bidder in a similar context.

Acknowledgements

With thanks for their advice to Alana Diamond (MoJ Analytical Procurement Group lead), Rachel Dubourg (MoJ joint chief social researcher) and Evelin Gaal (HMCTS social researcher).

Note

Although CCS frameworks are available across the UK, the author is based in central government in England. Other procurement routes may be used across other public sector bodies and in devolved administrations.

Government social research: where's that bid?

By Richard Self, head of research, monitoring and evaluation, Welsh Government/Welsh European Funding Office

In this article I'd like to set out what I look for in a good supplier response to an invitation to tender (ITT).

What does a good bid look like?

Typically, when drafting a research ITT, I use four criteria to assess the quality of bids, that is, whether the proposed workplan will meet the requirements of the research, and do so in a methodologically robust, cost-effective way:

1. A clear understanding of the policy context and need for the research.
2. A description of the proposed method and its suitability.
3. A description of the research team's skills and expertise.
4. A well set out project plan.

Not all ITTs use the same questions, but I think the information listed under each question would help to ensure a sound basis for a quality bid.

Before we go into the detail of each question below, I have a top tip. Make sure you carefully read what information you have been asked to supply in the ITT, and that you supply it in the specified sections. Don't just cut and paste from previous bids. This shows a lack of attention to detail. The clearer and better structured your bid, the easier it is for assessors to understand what is being proposed.

A clear understanding of the policy context and the need for the research

The ITT will nearly always include a context section: don't be tempted to just repeat this verbatim and consider the question answered.

In response to this question, I want the bidder to show me that they have a good level of knowledge of the context in which the policy or scheme being reviewed is operating. This should include what the current environment is and any relevant historical factors – is this a new scheme, does it build on prior similar schemes we can learn from, are there changes on the horizon that need to be considered?

Bidders should make sure they demonstrate they know what is specific to the home nation they are bidding to work in, and reference key legislation or local policies and strategies.

This section is the bidder's opportunity to demonstrate that they appreciate what is being asked of them. Bidders should try to expand on the ITT's context, and where possible, identify any gaps in the ITT's context. A supplier will be scored more positively if they draw on other evidence not included in the ITT, such as similar activity in other countries that we can learn from and evidence from relevant reports/papers.

A description of the proposed method

A well thought out and clear research method is essential. Similar to the context section in the ITT, we often include a proposed research method to aid bidders in their estimates of costs and timing for the research. Again, do not just repeat the proposed method back in your bid, build on it or offer alternatives but justify their suitability.

In the method section provide detail on what information will be collected, from whom and how. If the method includes a survey, include information on sampling frames, sampling methods, mode of administration, expected sample sizes and response rates (as well as methods used to improve these).

Describe how data will be analysed. If there is sufficient space in any response word limit explain how you will assess the quality of collected data (for example, the criteria you will use). Be explicit about what, if any, caveats there may be about the data or collection method. Highlight any dependencies (for example co-operation from different groups, access to data) and other use issues.

Map research methods back against the research questions so it is clear how each method contributes to the research aims and objectives.

Bidders should make sure they demonstrate they know what is specific to the home nation they are bidding to work in, and reference key legislation or local policies and strategies

We routinely invite bidders to suggest changes to the proposed method in the ITT if they can justify those changes. If you think there is a better method, or don't think the research aims and objectives can be met with the proposed method, tell us. We want to draw on your expert knowledge to deliver the best product we can. If bidders are unsure about suggesting changes to the method, we are more than willing to discuss any concerns or questions from bidders before they submit. We will share any questions and our answers with all other bidders in the spirit of fair and open competition.

A description of the research team's skills and experience

In this section I want to be reassured that a bidder's project team has the necessary skills, expertise and capacity to deliver the project plan on time. This can be a challenge for smaller bidders who may struggle to meet all the skills or capacity required. If bidders identify any gaps in their team, then consortium bids or subcontracting can be considered.

ITT word limits allowing, provide brief bios of team members' skills and expertise. Be clear about a team member's role and duties within the team. Ensure you list the name of the project manager, a designated deputy and a quality assurer.

To avoid the suspicion that expensive, very senior staff have been listed for their name value only, list how many days and on which tasks they will work.

Covid-19 has meant a greater emphasis on bidder staff capacity. Include detail about how any changes or absences in the proposed team will be addressed such as additional staff or associates who can be drawn on if needed.

A well set out project plan

A well laid out GANTT chart ticks nearly all the boxes here. I would recommend being cautious about your time allocation, as slippage is all too common. So be realistic about what can be delivered in what time. Set out clear project milestones that directly link back to your project methods and tasks.

Don't forget to include a risk assessment for the project with realistic assessments of likelihood and impact, summarised with appropriate RAG (red, amber, green) ratings. Suggest suitable risk mitigations. Hopefully, the impact of Covid-19 is behind us now, but some consideration of the impact of similar pandemic scenarios would be sensible.

Provide detail about project management arrangements. Who will be the project manager, the deputy project manager and the quality assurer? How often will project updates be provided and through what medium (for example email, telephone, face-to-face)? What are the processes to quality assure the outputs and so on?

I recommend including a detailed breakdown of task by team member and days allocated in this section. Don't put this information in the response to the cost breakdown section only as the cost breakdown may not be made available to bid assessors until after the technical criteria have been scored separately.

Cost/budget

At the start of this article, I said that I use four criteria to assess bids. There is a fifth: the cost or budget. I haven't focused on this in any detail as very often we state up front our expected budget, and because in Welsh Government this is scored using a mathematical formula. The lowest cost bid earns the maximum points available, and then the formula is applied to the remaining bids in order to attribute a weighted score. In Welsh Government, the assessment criteria are weighted to allow the criteria that we place the most value on to have the highest weighting, and therefore, the greatest impact on overall bid score. For social research, often the cost criteria has the lowest weighting as we are generally more concerned about the robustness of the method and the quality of the project team than we are the cost.

A plea

Please let commissioners know if you decide not to bid, and why. This needs only be a couple of sentences, although commissioners are usually happy to discuss this in more detail if you wish. This can be to your benefit too. If the reason is a lack of time to bid, we can make sure you are aware of any future reissue of the ITT.

Acknowledgements

I would like to offer thanks for the advice of my colleagues at Welsh Government in producing this article: Pete Baylis (senior procurement manager), Rhian Davies (head of housing research) and Faye Gracey (head of data acquisition and linking for research). Any errors in this article are mine alone.

Engaging everyone was key to Census 2021 success

By Jen Woolford, director of population statistics, Office for National Statistics

The response to Census 2021 exceeded all expectations, with 97% of households across England and Wales making sure they count when it comes to provision for local services like school places, GP surgeries and hospital beds. With census results now coming thick and fast, we look back at the role community engagement played in a successful data collection and how it remains key for the future plans of the Office for National Statistics.

Census 2021 happened at a time like no other. In March 2021, with England and Wales in lockdown during the latest wave of the coronavirus pandemic, nearly 25 million households completed their census questionnaires. Most did it online, some did it on paper. But from Bangor in Wales to Bognor Regis in England, people told us about the jobs they do, how they identify, their education and the type of house they live in.

They did so following a huge national advertising and media campaign, and materials arriving through letterboxes prompting them to take part and advising how to fill in their forms.

Community engagement

One of the great challenges with a census, or any national event, is not just ensuring everyone takes part, it is helping everyone feel part of it. We put in place a community-engagement programme which reached all groups, especially those who we thought might have the greatest barriers to participating: for example, some older people, students, some in houses of multiple occupancy, some minority ethnic groups. We considered different community needs and took a segmented approach to raise awareness, build trust and offer support. In return, we received fantastic support.

Before 2020, we had planned for what previous census experience and a 2019 rehearsal had taught us worked well: meeting communities face-to-face at their gatherings and events. With pandemic restrictions, we flexed to online meetings and social media community forums. Census messaging was dropped into prayer meetings across faith groups on Zoom, for example, while our 300-strong grassroots community team was able to work beyond geographic boundaries, attending virtual meetings in Liverpool or Newcastle.

The challenge of the pandemic meant we saw greater community spirit and strengthened online community networking which turned to our advantage. A strong online response meant we had detailed rapid insight into where alternative engagement offerings would have most value.

Good engagement does not end with the data collection though. With the first results published at the end of June, and now a rolling programme of topic summaries well underway, engagement is still front of our minds. We are working to ensure that community leaders know that the rich data they helped us gather is now becoming available, and that they can use the statistics for public benefit.

Working with local authorities

Sense checking what we do against local insight is also extremely valuable to the ongoing development of our population statistics. For this reason, and for the first time, we drew on the unique insight and expertise of local authorities across England and Wales to ensure we produced the best possible statistics for every area. Some 250 local government organisations took up the opportunity to take part in our own rigorous quality assurance processes, and we are building on this successful engagement too. A pilot study of 14 local authorities is underway to help inform developing work to transform population statistics, and a new route to share data and insights directly with us has been launched to increase our understanding of changes since Census Day.

What does the future hold?

While the census provides the best picture of society at a moment in time, it does so every ten years. A pillar to our engagement is now to help communities understand that the way we produce population and social statistics is changing.

We have been sharing our progress on making greater use of administrative data for some time, and in July we announced our ambition for a new dynamic population model building on earlier research.

As our plans and research develop, we want to ensure we capture wide-ranging views which are representative, inclusive and considerate of under-represented audiences. If you are a user of population statistics, please look out for a consultation during the first half of next year. Responses will feed into the national statistician's recommendation to government at the end of 2023 on what is needed for us to continue to realise our ambitions for more frequent, timely and inclusive population and social statistics.

SRA STAFF

Meet the SRA's new operations manager

Tell us about yourself…

Hi, my name is Tom Yeadon. I live in Skipton, North Yorkshire, with my wife, our two-year-old son, our dog (Dottie) and, by the time you read this, our daughter will have joined us.

I have spent most of my career so far working for charities. After leaving university and dipping my toe in the water with my first few roles, I found my feet at one of the bigger cancer charities where I spent eight very happy years. I have always worked in supporter care roles, so my focus has been on delivering great experiences. I started on the phones and emails, talking to donors and, over time, I progressed through to management roles in those same teams.

I left that role at the start of the pandemic and after such a long time in very similar roles, I wanted to try something different. I spent some time working for the Yorkshire Ambulance Service but quickly realised my heart was still in the charity world, so moved to a smaller Bradford-based charity where I worked as supporter relations manager in its leadership team. That was a great opportunity to try to do some big things in a smaller organisation, delivering strategies and focusing on the bigger picture.

When the time came for a new challenge, I saw the SRA operations manager role advertised and just thought, 'Yes! This ticks every box'. Another exciting charity with a social conscience, focused on quality, and delivering our best to members and training attendees, but also something different where I can push myself and learn new things. And here we are.

What are you hoping to achieve at the SRA?

This is a fun question, because I'm used to working at places where there is a lot to put right or fix. The SRA is very different: I've joined at a time when it's in great shape, having grown in recent years, and everyone here knows their job inside out. Our trainers are amazing: the feedback we receive underlines that.

> I think we can do even more to deliver for our members. Online networking has never been more important, and it's an area in which I think the SRA can offer something unique to our members

So, I get to be excited about what comes next! I think we can do even more to deliver for our members. Online networking has never been more important, and it's an area in which I think the SRA can offer something unique to our members. So that's firmly on my radar.

I'm really interested in how we can influence pathways into research, and factoring in our continued focus on improving diversity within the research community. I would like to do something there.

Fundamentally, I would like to see us as a trusted companion to even more researchers from education into early career, and to stay by their side throughout their research career.

Would you like to hear from members? About what?

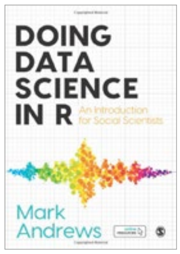
Yes, please! I'm really interested to hear from members (or even non-members) who aren't as interested in our training offering. What do you look for in a standalone membership? What other things are a priority for you in a membership offering?

Also, any suggestions about online networking features that you would like the SRA to offer. How would you like to interact with other members if not face-to-face? That could be things like special interest groups, online Q&As, discussion forums and anything in between. Please, send me your thoughts!

You can contact Tom at tom.yeadon@the-sra.org.uk

> Fundamentally, I would like to see us as a trusted companion to even more researchers from education into early career, and to stay by their side throughout their research career

Doing data science in R: an introduction for social scientists



Mark Andrews

SAGE, 2021

Reviewed by Kate Luxion, postgraduate research student, University College London

R is a language and environment for statistical computing and graphics. The further into the book you read, given the comprehensive nature of the text, the more it feels like a misnomer to call this simply an introduction. Andrews makes a strong case for R as the best option for statistical analysis.

In each section, Andrews clarifies both what to do and why it matters. The foundational information provided includes best practice and style advice for R code, data-visualisation techniques, and how to handle reproducibility in R. In also providing data management basics before discussing statistical tests and packages, the book easily surpasses the various beginner and advanced R training courses I have attended.

Written for PhD researchers and above, the style and readability match the intended audience. It is more readily accessible though because of integrated exercises, making the statistical information and data tangible and familiar. For more seasoned readers, the book's structure allows for dropping into relevant sections for in-depth information, making it a resource for more than beginners. As an extra perk, because of the author's specialisation in Bayesian statistics, the text also covers materials that are otherwise reserved for advanced and/or niche texts.

Besides the main audience, the text would be valuable for independent researchers and those working in the public and charitable sectors, especially with R/R studio being a free open-source resource. At a time when data-driven approaches are necessary for funding and policy, this text can facilitate the funding, implementation and evaluation of programmes in a sustainable, budget-friendly manner.

Overall, Andrews upholds his promise of accessible and in-depth information. However, there are two caveats. First, it may take some getting used to the formatting because of the technical writing and important snippets of code. Second, there are some small, but rare, grammatical issues which can take you out of the flow of reading. Regardless, this is a highly recommended resource.

Researching in the age of COVID-19: volume 1 response and reassessment

Helen Kara and Su-Ming Khoo

Policy Press, 2020

Reviewed by Sophie Payne-Gifford, University of Hertfordshire

Researching in the age of COVID-19 is the first of three edited collections responding in the early days of the Covid-19 crisis by Helen Kara (independent) and Su-Ming Khoo (Galway). It contains 11 chapters and is organised around three sections:

1. The switch to digital research as a result of the unfolding Covid-19 crisis.
2. The implications of continuing research already underway during the crisis.
3. Needs and capabilities of different groups while conducting research at that time.

It is written in a scholarly style with in-text citations, scientific tables and dense text, but if you are used to this style of writing it is not overly complicated.

The contributors are mostly academic social researchers but also include contributors from social research agencies and charities. Topics covered include science education, farming, the Covid-19 response, youth, poverty and more although the volume is focused more on methods and methodologies than a particular topic. The researchers and areas studied are global in scope and include high-, medium- and low-income countries. Methods covered include: telephone surveys, Skype interviews, text messaging, voice notes, secondary analysis, and qualitative and quantitative approaches. As such, it is a heterogeneous collection but useful as it focuses on both advantages and disadvantages of adapting to the crisis.

I recommend this publication to anyone who has had to adapt their research due to the pandemic and who wants scholarship to back up the changes they had to make on the hoof (definitely not me!). It also provides insight and options to those currently considering online research for reasons due to geography, disability, cost of travel and more. A third reason to recommend it, outlined by the editors, is that the lessons in adapting to the Covid-19 crisis apply to other emergency and disaster situations.

The purpose of this book is to showcase research methods in the shadow of the pandemic and it succeeds in this goal.

Titles for review

We are always looking for reviewers (SRA members only). Write a short review for us and you get to keep the book. All books up for review are listed below. If you are interested, please email admin@the-sra.org.uk and we'll send you guidelines. Please note that publications are available as eBooks only. Book reviews need to be submitted within 10 weeks of you receiving the book. Here are a few of the titles on offer:

The craft of qualitative longitudinal research
Bren Neale
SAGE Publications Ltd, 2021

Doing qualitative research – sixth edition
David Silverman
SAGE Publications Ltd, 2022

Doing qualitative research online – second edition
Janet E Salmons
SAGE Publications Ltd, 2022

Doing visual ethnography – fourth edition
Sarah Pink
SAGE Publications Ltd, 2021

Social research: issues, methods and process – fifth edition
Tim May and Beth Perry
McGraw Hill, 2022

Work placements, internships & applied social research
Jackie Carter
SAGE Publications Ltd, 2021

Call for presentations: SRA annual conference 2023

Thursday 15 June, Royal College of Physicians, London NW1

The SRA conference is back.

It's now four years since we last got together in person, so we are greatly looking forward to connecting again with friends and colleagues, old and new.

The SRA annual conference is the only forum the UK has for bringing together social researchers from all sectors and disciplines to share knowledge and ideas; to debate our most pressing professional issues; and, of course, to meet and talk.

Our 2019 conference attracted over 300 researchers and research users from central and local government and other public bodies, research agencies and institutes, academia, and the independent and charity sectors, representing the full range of research methodologies.

Do you have something to share? We are delighted to offer opportunities to present to this audience, in a 'research in practice' session. Send us your abstract for a 20-minute presentation to help researchers learn from your practical experiences: the research problems you faced, what you learned, what worked and what didn't, and why. Some theme suggestions to get you started:

- qualitative innovation
- survey developments
- partnerships
- impact and influence
- research in hard times
- co-production/participation
- adapting to change
- policy evaluation

Presentations should last around 20 minutes plus five minutes for Q&A. As a thank you for your contribution, we offer entry at a reduced delegate rate to one presenter for each presentation.

Submit your abstract on the template Word doc at: www.the-sra.org.uk/events

Deadline for submissions:
Monday 16 January

SRA TRAINING

Training courses in research methods

Unless otherwise stated, all courses are run online using Zoom.

In-person courses are held in London. Online courses run over one day or two half days, and extended courses over two full days or three part-days.

New dates and courses are being added all the time, so please visit www.the-sra.org.uk/training for updates.

Costs: **online**: SRA members: half day: £82.50; one day or two part-days: £165; two days or three part-days: £330. Non-members: half day: £110; one day or two part-days: £220; two days or three part-days: £440; **in person**: SRA members: £202.50; non-members: £270.

If you have any queries, please contact: lindsay.adams@the-sra.org.uk

Full details of all courses are at www.the-sra.org.uk/training

Evaluation

(All with Professor David Parsons)

7 & 8 February (2 afternoons): Theory-based evaluation: options and choices

16 February: Foundations of evaluation

17 February: Impact evaluation (advanced)

21 February: Research and evaluation project management

9 March (in person): Foundations of evaluation

10 March (in person): Impact evaluation (advanced)

28 March (in person): Theory-based evaluation: options and choices

29 March (in person): Building and using a theory of change

Qualitative

18 January: Designing qualitative research, with Dr Karen Lumsden

20 January: Narrative analysis, with Dr Karen Lumsden

25 January (in person): Conducting focus groups, with Professor Karen O'Reilly

26 January (in person): Introduction to ethnographic methods, with Professor Karen O'Reilly

26 & 27 January: Creative methods in qualitative data collection, with Dr Nicole Brown

27 January (in person): Qualitative data analysis, with Professor Karen O'Reilly

30 & 31 January (2 part-days): Managing challenging interviews, with NatCen

30 January: Qualitative data analysis, with Professor Karen O'Reilly

31 January: Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings, with Professor Karen O'Reilly

2 & 3 February (2 mornings): Introduction to qualitative research, with Professor Karen O'Reilly

6 to 8 February (3 part-days): Designing and moderating focus groups, with NatCen

9 February: Reporting qualitative data, with NatCen

22 February (in person): Planning and designing a qualitative study, with Professor Karen O'Reilly

23 February (in person): Qualitative interviewing, with Professor Karen O'Reilly

23 & 24 February (2 days): Depth interviewing skills, with NatCen

24 February (in person): Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings, with Professor Karen O'Reilly

2 & 3 March (2 afternoons): Creative data analysis, with Dr Nicole Brown

8 March: Narratives and storytelling in qualitative research, with Dr Karen Lumsden

15 March: Qualitative data analysis, with Professor Karen O'Reilly

17 March: Conducting online focus groups, with Dr Karen Lumsden

23 & 24 March (2 afternoons): Positionality and reflexivity in qualitative research, with Dr Nicole Brown

24 March: Introduction to qualitative interviewing, with Dr Karen Lumsden

29 March: Qualitative data analysis, with Professor Karen O'Reilly

16 to 18 May (in person): Analysis of qualitative data, with NatCen

Quantitative

17 & 18 January: Introduction to evidence reviews, with NatCen

18 & 19 January: Cognitive interviewing, with NatCen

20 January: Introduction to sampling or social surveys, with Dr Alexandru Cernat

24 to 26 January: Advanced questionnaire design, with Dr Pamela Campanelli

31 January & 1 February: Imputation and weighting, with Dr Pamela Campanelli

7 & 8 February (2 afternoons): 21 ways to test your survey questions, with Dr Pamela Campanelli

10 February: Understanding statistical concepts and basic tests, with Dr Valerija Kolbas

1 & 2 March (2 mornings): Questionnaire design, with NatCen

29 & 30 March: Cognitive interviewing, with NatCen

23 to 25 May: Advanced questionnaire design, with Dr Pamela Campanelli

20 to 22 June: Correlation, linear and logistic regression with R, with Dr Pamela Campanelli

27 & 28 June (2 afternoons): Web survey design, with Dr Pamela Campanelli

Other research skills

17 & 18 January: Introduction to evidence reviews, with NatCen

31 January (1 morning): Introduction to embodied inquiry, with Dr Nicole Brown

8 February: Data visualisation and infographic design, with Nigel Hawtin

9 & 10 February (2 mornings): Research with children and young people, with Berni Graham

9 & 10 February (2 afternoons): Doing evidence reviews using qualitative software, with Dr Christina Silver

24 February: Introduction to participatory action research, with Dr Karen Lumsden

27 March: Writing effective research reports, with Professor Simon Haslam

27 April (in person): Research with children and young people, with Berni Graham

SPOTLIGHT

Spotlight on SRA activity

Training
www.the-sra.org.uk/training
Many qual, quant and evaluation courses are online.

Events
www.the-sra.org.uk/events

Blog
www.the-sra.org.uk/blog
Topical posts on researching.

Journal
www.the-sra.org.uk/journal
Read back issues and find out how to write an article for our free journal.

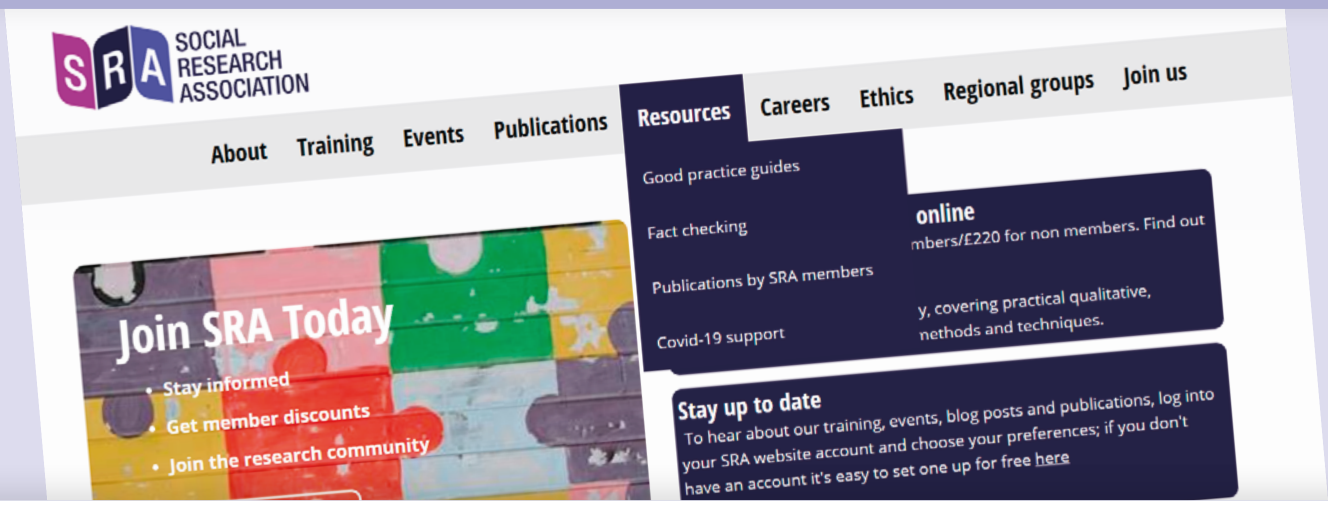
Resources
www.the-sra.org.uk/resources
Good practice guides and more.

Ethics
www.the-sra.org.uk/ethics
An expert forum for members' queries, good practice guides and more.

Member resources
Log in, go to www.the-sra.org.uk then see 'members' section.

Free access to 5,500+ social science journals, data science training at a third off, and more.

Edited by Shirley Henderson www.shirleyhenderson.co.uk   Designed by www.graphics.coop



SOCIAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

research matters

Views expressed by individual contributors do not necessarily reflect those of the SRA.

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3 February (March); **28 April** (June); **16 July** (September); **20 October** (December).

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