Research Quality Assurance Policy

Research quality is a broad concept that does not depend solely to the skills of the researcher or the methods they employ. While the application of sound research principles is necessary to ensure a high quality output, it is not sufficient. To be considered high quality, research must also contribute in some way to important organisational objectives or wider societal outcomes. It must be useful.

This is consistent with the themes underpinning the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the official system for assessing research quality in UK higher education institutions. The REF assesses research quality using three main dimensions: outputs, impact and environment. Under the REF outputs are assessed in terms of "originality, significance and rigour", with reference to international research quality standards. Impact relates to the "reach and significance" that research has on the economy and society while environment relates to the contribution that the research makes to the vitality and sustainability of the wider discipline or research base and/or culture.

These broad criteria provide a helpful framework for guiding our own approach to research quality. In order to apply this approach it is necessary to consider quality at every stage of the research process – from identifying the initial requirement through to disseminating the final results. This implies the need for a holistic approach to quality control.

The Scottish Land Commission is committed to undertaking and commissioning high quality research and recognises the need for a holistic approach to quality control. To achieve this we have adopted a project management approach to research quality assurance, which involves the systematic application of good project management throughout the life-time of every research project. This is underpinned by a "project approval checklist", which must be completed by the relevant project manager when initiating any new research project.

The remainder of this document outlines the key stages in the approach.

Research Need

The starting point for any high quality piece of research must be a clear understanding of why it is needed and what it is expected to achieve. Specifying clear objectives and articulating how the research is expected to contribute to the Land Commission's strategic priorities is therefore an essential first step.

When commissioning or undertaking research we should always seek to build on the existing body of knowledge and avoid unnecessary duplication. After identifying a gap in our knowledge the next step should always be to investigate whether similar research has previously been undertaken by others or is currently underway. Identifying relevant stakeholders and engaging them in the process at an early stage and reviewing what has already been written on a topic are therefore important priorities before commencing or commissioning new research.

Approach

Once the need for research is confirmed the next step should be to assess whether we have the expertise and capacity to deliver the project in-house. If it is concluded that external support will be required initial informal investigations should be undertaken to scope out potential suppliers.

Regardless of whether research is commissioned or undertaken internally all projects should be underpinned by a research brief. The core components of this are detailed in the project approval checklist. For externally commissioned projects this brief should be used to provide the basis for the research specification issued to prospective contractors.

The project brief is a key document that will guide the delivery of each project. It should clearly articulate the aims and objectives of the research and specify the required outputs and time-scales, thereby providing a framework for resolving any potential difficulties that may arise during the course of the work programme.

Externally commissioned projects will usually[1] be procured competitively following Scottish Government procurement guidance. Tenders will always be evaluated on the basis of cost and quality with quality criteria weighted significantly higher than cost (e.g. 70%/30%).

Typically we would expect the quality criteria to cover: contractors understanding of the requirement; proposed methodology & approach; the skills and previous experience of the proposed project team; and the contractor's approach to project management. Each of these elements will be individually weighted and assessed based on the information provided in the tender document. We would also expect to take up references for successful contractors prior to appointment.

Procuring quality research will always rely to some extent on individual judgement but to help mitigate the risks of this we intend to adopt a collaborative approach throughout the life-cycle of each project. This will allow us to draw on experience from across the team and, where appropriate, from relevant external organisations. Where appropriate we will also seek input from individuals with specialised expertise to help verify the quality of research outputs and provide formal or informal peer review as required.

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[1] On occasion low value contracts may be let through non-competitive action where there is clear business case for doing so.

Delivery

A key measure of success – and therefore quality – of any project is whether the expected outputs are delivered on-time and within budget. Before starting a project it is therefore important to have a delivery plan in place setting out key mile-stones and deadlines so that regular checks can be made to monitor progress throughout the work programme. To be effective this must plan for the allocation of staff and financial resources at appropriate stages of the project and be reflected in internal resource planning processes.

Dissemination

Research that sits on a shelf and has no influence on policy or practice has failed to achieve its primary purpose and therefore cannot be considered high quality. A central focus for all research projects must therefore be on how the outputs will be disseminated and used.

This will involve identifying who the key audiences for any piece of work are and considering how we might best communicate the results with them. Part of this is also about thinking through how we intend to make use the research outputs and what linkages there might be with other areas of the Programme of Work.

Continuous Improvement

To ensure that we continuously improve our approach to research quality it is important that we seek to learn from past experience. To achieve this project managers should take some time at the end of each project to reflect on the lessons learned and what they might do differently next time. Where appropriate project managers should also provide constructive feedback to contractors to help them to learn from the experience as well.

Ethics

Research undertaken or commissioned by the Scottish Land Commission should follow the highest practical ethical standards. In order to achieve this all staff and contractors involved in delivering research involving people will be expected to adhere to the following five key ethical principles:

- sound application and conduct of social research methods and appropriate dissemination and utilisation of the findings;
- participation based on valid informed consent;
- enabling participation;
- avoidance of personal harm; and
- non-disclosure and appropriate disposal and retention of personal information.

Project managers should consider the potential ethical issues associated any new research at the outset of the project. Further guidance about how to do this is contained in the SLC research ethics policy and procedure.

Capacity Building

The Land Commission is committed to supporting the development of land related research capacity. To this end we will proactively pursue opportunities to build links with relevant academic partners and support the development of relevant academic expertise.

Date for next review: September 2018.