UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY

RESEARCH ACCREDITATION PANEL

Minute

Thursday 9 July 2020

Present

Committee Members
Professor Paul Boyle (Chair)
Andrew Bolton (representing Paul Lodge, Department for Work & Pensions)
Mark Brewin (representing Kevin Fletcher, HM Revenue & Customs)
Tricia Dodd (Independent member)
Chris Dibben (Independent member)
Andrew Garrett (Independent member)
Emma Gordon (UK Research and Innovation)
Sarah Henry (ONS)
Sarah Mathieson (Independent member)

Advisors
Jason Riches (Legal Services, ONS)
Peter Stokes (Research Services & Data Access, ONS)
Andy Wall (Chief Security Officer, ONS)
Ross Young (Data Protection Officer, UK Statistics Authority)

UK Statistics Authority
Lily O'Flynn
Simon Whitworth

In Attendance
Peter Benton (Population and Public Policy Operations, ONS), for item 7
Becky Tinsley (COVID-19 Surveillance Studies Analysis, ONS), for item 7

Apologies
Siobhan Carey (NISRA)
Roger Halliday (Scottish Government)
Glyn Jones (Welsh Government)

1.   Introductions
1.1   The Chair welcomed the members to the sixteenth meeting of the Research Accreditation Panel.

1.2   Members approved the minutes of the meeting held on 29 May 2020.

1.3   Lily O'Flynn updated the meeting with progress on actions from previous meetings. All actions were complete or otherwise in progress.

2.   Project Accreditation: New Projects
2.1   The Panel considered nine new projects and the following seven projects were accredited:

- Ethnic inequalities in the UK

- The choice to become multinational: the driving incentives and the effect of the domestic economy
- Education and Spatial Mobility
- An evaluation of the Apprenticeships Levy using firm level data
- The benefits of digital technologies adoption on UK manufacturing businesses: Manufacturing renaissance, servitization and digital technologies' adoption
- Local Institutions, Productivity, Sustainability and Inclusivity Trade-offs (LIPSIT)
- Analysis of cash flow impacts on UK companies

2.2 The Panel agreed the accreditation of the project from the Joint Biosecurity Centre: Identifying flare ups of the COVID19 infection across the UK, subject to minor revisions, that was considered via correspondence prior to this meeting.

3. Project Accreditation: Precedent Report

3.1 Lily O'Flynn presented the Panel with a report of the five projects that the RAP Secretariat agreed could be accredited via precedent, given their high level of similarity to previous projects. The Panel was satisfied that the projects that had been accredited via precedent were of significant similarity to projects previously accredited by the RAP.

3.2 Moving forward, the Panel agreed that any research projects requesting access to secure data that is being used for research for the first time should come to the Panel for full review in the first instance.

3.3 To assure data owners of the RAP's robust governance framework used to consider research projects, the Panel requested that DEA accredited processing environments explicitly articulate the process for project accreditation via precedent to data owners making data available for research purposes under the Digital Economy Act legal gateway.

ACTION: When accrediting projects via precedent, the Secretariat to liaise with DEA accredited processing environments to ensure that data owners agree for requested data to be accredited via precedent when accessed via the Digital Economy Act gateway.

4. Metrics Report

4.1 Simon Whitworth presented the Panel with some key metrics to illustrate how the Research strand of the Digital Economy Act is being operationalised through the work of the Research Accreditation Panel. The metrics showed that the cross-UK network of accredited processors is increasingly using the DEA to provide researcher access to secure data. The report illustrated that the majority of the data that is being made available under the DEA continues to be data from the ONS.

4.2 Emma Gordon updated the Panel on the ADR-UK's ongoing work to support other government departments to make use of the legal gateway provided by the Digital Economy Act to make data owned by multiple public authorities available under one governance framework. The Panel agreed that this work should be carried out alongside the UK Statistics Authority's ongoing engagement activities designed to promote the work of the RAP, including: (i) the publication of an article in Evaluator magazine highlighting the opportunities the DEA provides for policy evaluation; (ii) an online module on access to public authority data and research ethics for the University of Glasgow's data analytics in business and industry; and (iii) nomination to provide a presentation at 2020's virtual Data for Policy Conference.

ACTION: The Secretariat to work with the ADR-UK to find opportunities to with engage with government departments on the advantages of using the generic data access gateway provided by the Digital Economy Act.

4.3   The Panel agreed that it would be useful to receive information on the types of organisations that are using the DEA to access public authority data, including detail on the specific organisations that regularly use the DEA and the datasets that are most regularly accessed under the DEA. This information could provide a guide to the RAP to help target promotional activities to groups within the research community that are less engaged with the work of the RAP and the opportunities for secure data access provided by the DEA.

ACTION: The Secretariat to implement the agreed changes and include information on the sectors and organisations that are using the DEA gateway, and the datasets most frequently accessed under the DEA in the next report of metrics to the Panel.

4.4   The Panel supported the publication of project case studies on the UK Statistics Authority website to promote and illustrate the public good provided by research projects accredited under the DEA.

ACTION: The Secretariat to work with DEA accredited processing environments to understand when research projects produce and publish outputs, so that case studies can be created for completed DEA projects and published on the UK Statistics Authority webpages.

4.5   The Panel agreed that additional commentary is required on the number of research project applications that are terminated before reaching the Research Accreditation Panel for consideration. The Panel agrees that this information would be useful, given that the Panel is yet to completely reject any research project applications that it has considered, due to the comprehensive user support that researchers receive when preparing applications for submission to the RAP.

ACTION: The Secretariat to work with DEA accredited data provision environments to record the level of research project applications to present in a metrics report at a future Research Accreditation Panel meeting.

5.   Processor Accreditation: Ongoing Applications Update
5.1   Andy Wall updated the Research Accreditation Panel on the status of the ongoing accreditation of processors. Andy confirmed that ongoing COVID-19-related work that organisations seeking accreditation are prioritising has prevented ongoing DEA processor accreditations from progressing.

5.2   Andy Wall reported that the UK Data Archive has informed the UK Statistics Authority Accreditation team of an upcoming major change to its current accreditation conditions, with the adoption of the SafePods Network as an endpoint for researchers to remotely access data hosted by the UK Data Archive. The Accreditation team will take this forward with the UK Data Archive and present a revised accreditation report for the processing environment once the change has been evaluated.

ACTION: The UK Statistics Authority Accreditation team to present the Panel with an updated accreditation report for the UK Data Archive once the processor's adoption of the SafePods Network has been evaluated by the Accreditation team.

5.3   Given the centrality of eDRIS to the data processing infrastructure in Scotland, the UK Statistics Authority Accreditation team has committed to assessing eDRIS's updated accreditation material within two weeks, once this material has been submitted, to expediate the DEA accreditation of this processing environment.

6.   Processor Accreditation: NISRA RSU Annual Review Report
6.1   Andy Wall presented the Panel with the first annual review report of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency's Research Support Unit (NISRA RSU). Andy reported that the UK Statistics Authority's Accreditation team recommends that the accreditation of NISRA RSU should continue. The annual review successfully demonstrated that both the security and capability posture of NISRA RSU has been maintained, and in some cases had improved to a mature state.

6.2   The Panel agreed to validate the continued accreditation of the NISRA RSU under chapter 5 of part 5 of the Digital Economy Act, based on the evidence provided in the annual review report.

ACTION: The Secretariat to write to the NISRA RSU to confirm the continuation of accreditation under the Digital Economy Act, following the successful completion of this annual review.

6.3   Andy Wall confirmed that the UK Statistics Authority Accreditation team will be undertaking the annual review of the ONS and the ONS Secure Research Service (SRS) in the coming months. The UK Statistics Authority's Accreditation team has confirmed that it will also review the ongoing updates to the SRS's technical systems during the period of annual review.

6.4   The UK Statistics Authority's Accreditation team will invite external organisations to provide independent oversight of this annual review. The Accreditation team will work with the Secretariat to ensure the required level of independent oversight is in place for the review to provide assurance of the impartiality of the review process.

ACTION: The UK Statistics Authority's Accreditation team to work with the Secretariat to ensure independent oversight of the ONS and ONS SRS annual reviews is in place to provide assurance of the impartiality of the review process.

7.   COVID-19 Infection Survey
7.1   Peter Benton, ONS Population and Public Policy Operations, presented the Panel with an overview of recent analysis undertaken as part of the COVID-19 Infection Survey, and updated the Panel on further phases of the study planned for the coming months.

7.2   The Panel supported the research team's plans to scale up the project in its next phases to support government decision-making on localised flare-ups of COVID-19 infection. The Panel also welcomed Peter Benton's confirmation that the de-identified study data used in this project will be made available to accredited researchers via the Digital Economy Act gateway.

7.3   Becky Tinsley, ONS COVID-19 Surveillance Studies Analysis, presented the Panel with an overview of the complementary studies that the ONS is involved with, which have close links to the COVID-19 Infection Survey. Becky confirmed that the studies are designed to understand the level of COVID-19 infection in non-private household settings, such as care homes, schools and prisons.

7.4   The Panel supported the ONS's involvement in these further COVID-19 surveillance studies, and would welcome confirmation from those public authorities involved in these studies that de-identified data used in this analysis will be made available within DEA accredited processing environments for use by accredited researchers under the DEA gateway.

8.   Any Other Business

8.1   Emma Gordon confirmed that the first Ministry of Justice dataset curated under the ADR-UK's Data First project has recently been deposited in the ONS SRS for research use. The Panel welcomed Emma's confirmation that this data will be made available to researchers via the DEA gateway. The Panel welcomes the submission of ADR-funded project applications requesting access to this data in the coming months.

8.2   Emma Gordon agreed to coordinate with the Secretariat on promoting the use of these new data for public good research, given the Secretariat's ongoing focus on engagement with the research community to advertise the research opportunities available under the DEA gateway.

ACTION: ADR-UK to work with the Secretariat to coordinate promotional activity on the upcoming availability of new datasets under the Data First project.

8.3   The Panel supported Andy Garrett's recommendation that the RAP undertakes a review of the Panel's work, as the Panel nears the accreditation of its 100th project. As the RAP has been accrediting project applications for nearly one year, the Secretariat agreed to provide the Panel with a comprehensive report on the operationalisation of the Research strand of the Digital Economy Act, through the work of the RAP over the last 12 months.

ACTION: The Secretariat to present on the progress made by the Research Accreditation Panel on the operationalisation on the Research strand of the Digital Economy Act, as the Panel approaches both the accreditation of its 100th project and its first year of project accreditation, at a future meeting of the Panel.

8.4   The next meeting of the Research Accreditation Panel is on 7 September 2020.