Directions for future research in project management: The main findings of a UK government-funded research network

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Abstract

In 2003 the UK's Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) agreed to fund a research network – *Rethinking Project Management* – to define a research agenda aimed at enriching and extending the subject of project management beyond its current conceptual foundations. The main argument for the proposed Network highlighted the growing critiques of project management *theory* and the need for new research in relation to the developing *practice*. Being the first paper of this Special Issue, this paper presents the Network's main findings: a framework of five directions aimed at developing the field intellectually in the following areas: project complexity, social process, value creation, project conceptualisation, and practitioner development. These areas are based on a comprehensive analysis of all the research material produced over a 2-year period and represent the dominant pattern of ideas to emerge from the Network as a whole. They are not meant to be *the* agenda for future research, but *an* agenda to inform and stimulate current and future research activity in developing the field of project management. Methodologically, the five research directions represent a synthesis of ideas for how the current conceptual base needs to develop in relation to the developing world of practice. As well as presenting the main findings, the paper also presents a practical research framework aimed at researchers working in the field. The intended audience for the paper is the project management research community, and also researchers in other management areas for whom the Network's findings might be of interest.
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1. Background to the network

One of the most important organisational developments in recent years has been the significant growth in project work across different sectors and industries. Academic research in the UK [1] confirms this trend, which looks set to continue with increasing numbers of new developments and new initiatives being pursued through projects and programmes. Recent industry reports, e.g. [2] also highlight the growing adoption of project management standards and practices across large numbers of organisations, including the creation of project management centres of excellence within UK government departments [3]. No longer just a sub-discipline of engineering, the management of projects – including programme management and portfolio management – is now the dominant model in many organisations for strategy implementation, business transformation, continuous improvement and new product development. Similarly, in areas such as infrastructure renewal, urban regeneration and community development, project management practices are becoming increasingly important, as more and more work is organised through projects and programmes [4]. Despite these developments in practice, however, the current conceptual base of project management continues to attract criticism for its lack of relevance to practice [5–21] and, consequently, to improved performance of projects across different

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industrial sectors. It was against this background in 2003 that the UK's Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) agreed to fund a new research network called *Rethinking Project Management: Developing a New Research Agenda* between 2004 and 2006. The Network proposal highlighted many of the growing critiques of project management concepts, and the increasing calls for new perspectives from other related disciplines in the social sciences, e.g. [17]. In summary, the main argument was *not* that the extant project management body of thought with its concepts, methodologies and tools is worthless and should be abandoned, but rather that a new research network was needed to enrich and extend the field beyond its current intellectual foundations, and connect it more closely to the challenges of contemporary project management practice.

2. Network aims and primary output

Shaped then by the argument above, and the objectives of EPSRC Networks, the stated aims of the *Rethinking Project Management* Network were:

1. To create a new inter-disciplinary network of academics, researchers and practitioners interested in developing the field of project management and improving real-world practice.
2. To identify and define an inter-disciplinary research agenda aimed at enriching and extending the field beyond its current foundations.

Focusing on the second of these two aims, this paper presents the primary output of the Network – a framework of five directions for future research – based on a comprehensive analysis of all the research material produced over a 2-year period, including sensemaking papers, meeting minutes, meeting notes, practitioner presentations and papers from other events. (The next paper in this Special Issue discusses the research methodology and the whole collaborative inquiry approach upon which these findings are based. For a brief summary of the research methodology and the Network meeting programme, see Table 1.) Collectively, the ideas in this paper represent the most discernible pattern of ideas to emerge from the Network as a whole, and the aim of this paper is

Table 1

| Rethinking Project Management (EPSRC Network 2004-2006) **Summary of the Network Research Methodology** |

With the emphasis on 'rethinking' project management, significant attention was given to the *process of inquiry*, and how this should be organised to achieve the Network's primary aims. Given the complexity of the phenomena under investigation, and the different perspectives of the people involved, the inquiry process was deliberately organised as a *learning system,* to help the Network 'learn' its way to an agenda for future research. Being a learning process, it was also necessary to conceptualise *how* the Network would do this, and the concept adopted was that of *organised sensemaking.*

Based on this inquiry model, a programme of meetings was organised between 2004 and 2006 involving academics from fifteen UK universities, a number of overseas academics from Canada, Europe, Australia and the US, and a number of senior practitioners from organisations across the private, public and voluntary sectors. Each meeting was carefully planned, and the main substantive meetings were closely aligned with the interests and perspectives of the participants, focusing on seven core areas of concern - *projectification, managing multiple projects, actuality of projects, dealing with uncertainty, managing business projects, the profession and practitioner development* – see below.

It was also decided that seven meetings would not be sufficient to develop the research agenda output of the Network, and that significant between-meeting activity would also be needed. Consequently, a considerable amount of activity was carried out between the meetings, resulting in a series of sensemaking papers covering the perceived issues and themes arising from each meeting. These papers were then used to help discern the research directions presented in this paper. For a full account of the Network research methodology, see the second paper of this Special Issue [2].

PROGRAMME	Date	Location	Areas of Concern
Meeting 1	30th-31st March 2004	Manchester	Shaping and Planning the Network
Meeting 2	15th July 2004	London	Emerging Themes and New Perspectives
Meeting 3	20th-21st October 2004	Newcastle	Projects Across Sectors (Business Projects)
Meeting 4	27th-28th January 2005	London	Projectification and Managing Multiple Projects
Meeting 5	26th-27th May 2005	Strathclyde	Actuality of Projects and Uncertainty
Meeting 6	21st-22nd September 05	Bath	Profession and Practitioner Development
Meeting 7	24th-25th January 2006	Manchester	Directions, Messages and Network Review