

# Evaluation of ARK 2005

## Summary report

Brian Harvey  
Brian Harvey Social Research  
2 Rathdown Crescent  
Terenure  
Dublin 6W  
Tel: 353.1.4903039  
Fax: 353.1.4903076  
Email: brharvey@iol.ie  
VAT: 3013118V

## Summary

The purpose of this evaluation was to review the work of ARK over the period 2001-5, noting key developments, examining performance, studying ARK's institutional position and looking at ARK's options for the future. The evaluation was carried out by means of interview, on-line survey, examination of products and documentation and survey of users and clients. The process of consultation was extensive, involving 45 interviews and 56 written contributions.

ARK expanded its work considerably during the period under review. The three previous resources grew to eight. Among the original resources, there were significant additions to CAIN; at least five modules of *Life and Times* were run each year, the results for four years being published as books; and ORB expanded from 900 entries with 270 summaries to 1,300 entries and 884 summaries. New series established were *Young Life & Times* (YLT), *Elections*, the Household Panel Survey, Surveys On Line and the Research Centre. YLT was run for two years and the results published in a book. A series of surveys dating to 1989 was made available through Surveys On Line. The Household Panel Survey made available discrete data on Northern Ireland for 2001-3 for researchers. *Elections* provided a range of popular electoral material. The Research Centre carried out commercial and *pro-bono* work.

Web use rose from 4.4m hits for CAIN in 2001 to 6.5m hits in 2005, up 48% and from 0.1m to 2.8m hits for the rest of the ARK site. 21 issues of *Research Update* were published during this period. Income generated totalled almost £1.68m, averageing £419,214 annually, with an upward trend. 17 seminars were held. ARK was rebranded with a range of marketing materials. The staff complement rose to 8.5 full time equivalents. A number of proposals were made for future development, both formally in the corporate and operational plans and also informally.

ARK was cited substantially in 46 books, edited books or journals. 12 reports or fact sheets were published. Media coverage averaged 56 citations a year, totalling 224, from local to international press, radio to television and the digital media. The seminar series was rated positively in contemporary evaluations.

The interview group, clients and survey groups rated ARK's work highly. The interview group described ARK as a quality resource, commended the navigability of its website, praised the seminar series and indicated that ARK was used as a significant resource in the academic and teaching community. Clients described ARK as first class, well organized and professional at all times. The on-line survey rated ARK at between 68% and 94% for usefulness and in a band from 80% to 100% for navigability. Among users, 72% gave ARK a high rating, 28% a moderate rating and none a negative rating. 68% believed that ARK had made a lot of impact on the social and political knowledge of Northern Ireland, 32% a little and none no impact. Ratings for accessing services, advice and professionalism were 100%. ARK was widely praised for its combination of quality, quantity, utility, depth, breadth and substance; its ability to generate public interest; its high media profile; the clear, free, accessible, easy-to-understand manner in which it publishes, summarizes and presents its findings; and its openness to ideas, themes, people and partners. Commentators described it as an impressive, invaluable, interdisciplinary resource and the standard by which others should be judged.

Six issues arose or were examined in the course of this research. These were the changed university environment, staffing, ARK as a joint venture between the two universities, accounts, the database/ mailing list and future agenda. The changed university environment was the most important, involving the requirement that university researchers, either individually or collectively, raise all their own costs, charge for services on the basis of Full Economic Costing (FEC) and a much increased overhead and are expected to contribute to the Research Assessment Exercise. ARK must also face changes in the university institutions, with its probable relocation in Queen's University to a new, larger school of social policy, sociology, social work and social care. These changes come at a time when funding for a number of staff positions is coming to an end over 2005-6. Positively, ARK's experience as a joint enterprise between the two universities was well regarded. ARK continues to experience problems with accounts in the University of Ulster, the situation showing no improvement in four years. There are problems with the database/ mailing list, which is out of date, unrevised and uncirculated. A series of themes and working methods were outlined for the development and extension of ARK's original and new resources.

ARK's value, substance and quality are unchallenged. Despite its impressive performance, the prospects of the universities finding a way to accommodate ARK outside the rigours of FEC and its implications are dim. ARK faces three options for its future development. These choices are fundamental, affecting its orientation, role, future work and staffing and all are consequences of the changed university environment. Two options give ARK the opportunity to act pro-actively, using its strengths, reputation and performance to best advantage.

ARK could choose, first, to embrace the the new university environment and develop as an academic body, operating full economic costing, developing a teaching role and making a significant contribution to the RAE.

Second, ARK could choose to expand its applied role in the service of the governmental and non-governmental community, becoming an independent applied social research institute outside the universities.

A third, but more passive possibility is for ARK to await the decisions of the universities and attempt to negotiate a position that manages to preserve its existing role and form.

These options are a matter for the director and staff. It is recommended, as an interim step, that (1) an internal paper be prepared outlining how the academic role could be put into effect and that (2) advice be taken on forming ARK as an independent institute. As a result, these courses of action could be better understood and sketched out as options before decisions were finally made.

Finally, recommendations are made to address accounting problems within the university and to put the database/ mailing list in order.