

Green shoots emerge to commercialise social sciences



The social sciences have a crucial role to play in the COVID-19 recovery, and in addressing many other challenges society faces. However, it is clear that there are persistent barriers that continue to impact the route to social science commercialisation.

This topic was the subject of a recent webinar – part of the Aspect Annual Event [series](#) – which focused on ‘Building a better world after COVID-19: Transforming how we think about social science commercialisation.’

The session highlighted that the pandemic has in fact created new market opportunities for SHAPE subjects (social sciences, humanities and arts). Virus management, for example, aside from being a medical challenge, is as much about compliance, mental health, behavioural management, policy adoption – all of which are very much challenges that social sciences are playing a key role in addressing.

From a more general standpoint, to deliver prosperity that benefits all society, we need to focus on four key ‘capitals’. Those are our economic capital, for sure, but also our human capital – people’s education and skills, as well as their mental health and wellbeing; our social capital – the strength and resilience of our social, cultural and governance institutions; and our natural capital – including the drive to net zero and the biodiversity of our planet.

Too often the solution for addressing these issues has been thought to lie in public policy measures alone. As important as these might be, the social sciences have a critical role to play in effecting market solutions directly through private commerce, whether through for-profit or social enterprises. Governments, businesses, civil societies and others can all benefit from insights of the social sciences in developing and delivering strategies which can contribute to the attainment of goals across this broader ‘prosperity scorecard’.

In addition, as discussed during the webinar, Government policy is creating a ‘once in a generation opportunity’ for R&D that social sciences can capitalise on. There is government consensus that the UK economy requires rebalancing towards a more research-based economy. The Government’s target of increasing public and private sector spending on R&D to reach 2.4% of GDP by 2027 is an ambitious target, but we can use this as an opportunity to make a strong case for the value of social sciences, both on its own and in conjunction with STEM, and the need for interdisciplinary teams to tackle interdisciplinary challenges.

The barriers to commercialisation persist

At the same time, however, there are a number of challenges that continue to impact the ability of social scientists to take advantage of these opportunities. Arguably the insights of social sciences are already being extremely well commercialised, in that they power key areas of our service-based economy. But the barriers to universities commercialising social sciences research themselves and of linking academic expertise with businesses continue to be significant.

Of central prominence here are the six challenges identified within [a report](#) by the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS) (2005), which highlighted six interconnected challenges for the commercialisation process specific to these disciplines:

- (i) the value of social sciences research is not understood by industry;
- (ii) there is a lack of standard practices for working with industry;
- (iii) there is a lack of 'business skills' among social sciences researchers;
- (iv) institutions are not equipped to accommodate social sciences research commercialisation;
- (v) incentives to undertake commercial work are lacking; and
- (vi) industry is unaware of the possibilities and limitations of social sciences research, and industrial R&D spend on social sciences is minimal compared to industrial R&D spend on science.

Added to these challenges, as discussed during our webinar, are two issues that compound the situation. Firstly, that time is often the limiting factor for social science research commercialisation. Academics are under pressure to perform multiple jobs simultaneously (e.g. researcher, teacher and administrator) and so a lack of time can limit their ability to engage with commercialisation. Secondly, social science research can be challenging to protect through traditional routes, e.g., patents. The lack of effective intellectual property protection means speed to market and establishing the brand as a primary service provider is critical to success. This contrasts with the traditional STEM routes to commercialisation, where patent law gives researchers a long protection period to commercialise their innovation. However, commercialising research at speed requires time and dedicated focus that most senior academics prioritise using for their research rather than a business idea.

Aspect – driving commercialisation in the social sciences

The good news is that there are green shoots emerging to raise the profile of and provide support for social science commercialisation. I am involved in driving forward one critical initiative that is seeking to transform how social sciences research is commercialised.

Aspect (a Research England-funded Connecting Capability programme) is a network of organisations working together to support innovation, entrepreneurship and research commercialisation in social sciences – currently comprising 14 leading UK institutions, and growing. Aspect is seeking to galvanise a solutions-focused approach that cuts across the divides of academic/commercial, research/applied and complementary specialisms.

Within this, we are developing a range of approaches suitable to the nature of the social and commercial challenge, and the form of the intellectual property involved – creating an ecosystem (an innovation community) of people (researchers, research users and entrepreneurs), process (optimising the commercialisation pipeline) and investment to bring into being completely new forms of social sciences commercialisation. The programme is focused on creating products and new businesses, not solely on the commercialisation of specific intellectual property rights. Critically, the Aspect programme has been designed to address each of the CHASS challenges highlighted above.

We have just published the [Aspect Learning Report 2020](#), which provides an overview of the key insights and learnings from across the network over the last twelve months. We are now at the midway point of the programme, and I am delighted to report that our ambitious activities are progressing well, including:

- 16 funded projects that are well underway, which aim to test and pilot new approaches to maximising the commercial and business opportunities from social sciences research
- The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) Commercialisation Service is now well

established, and – as a social science-only offering – it is proving to be a valuable platform for developing and testing new models of commercialisation

- [Zinc](#), a venture capital startup focused on the social sciences, continues its programme of activities, which has supported 150 founders and engaged social scientists in 65% of the currently active ventures

Ultimately, all of this fantastic output and activity is helping to build the Aspect network, and earlier this year we welcomed several new associate members to the programme. I very much look forward to continuing to work with the Aspect community to build an exciting future for social science commercialisation.



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