

# Aspect

## Briefing Note: Funding Challenges for Social Science Business Engagement



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## Introduction

The ASPECT Business Engagement Community of Practice (BECoP) includes professionals from 21 Universities and Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) who have responsibility for facilitating social science engagement with business (defined as private sector organisations and social enterprise). We share good practice examples of business engagement through regular meetings and events.

We have noted the ways in which social scientists engage with business and how these can differ from other disciplines.

In early Spring 2021, the BECoP explored how funding mechanisms can best fit the needs of social scientists, to ensure that social science businesses engagement is given the same encouragement and recognition as other disciplines within universities and by funders.

We first considered our experience of funding for business engagement in the social sciences. We then invited a number of key funders to tell us more about their scheme design and the evolving space they are working in.

In this note, we present the thoughts of the BECoP with regards to the key challenges identified, and how these can be addressed by funders, universities and social science leaders. We welcome further discussions of this nature with all funders. If you wish to know more, please contact the Aspect Programme Team: [britta.wyatt@oxentia.com](mailto:britta.wyatt@oxentia.com).

## Challenges

During our initial discussion with COP Members, we identified a number of interrelated challenges for business engagement in social sciences [see Box 1].

The ASPECT BECoP identified four challenges commonly encountered when engaging social science disciplines in activities with business:

1. **Unfamiliarity:** some academics are hesitant to work with companies due to unfamiliarity with the private sector. Social scientists tend to be inclined to think of their research as having greater relevance and applicability to non-commercial organisations.
2. **The value proposition:** social scientists often struggle to easily articulate and defend the 'value' of activities and outcomes with businesses, especially against measures of value set by others, outside of the social science space.
3. **Internal university structures:** organisational structures and strategies for tech transfer and commercialisation can mean that social science researchers are less likely to be considered for business engagement and they themselves are less inclined to access that support.
4. **Unsuitable funding schemes:** funding adapted from a STEM model of engagement with an unhelpful focus on ROI and economic measures of success with timeframes for delivery based on tech transfer, and based on an assumption of a transactional relationship, are not appropriate for some types of social science engagement with business.

*Box 1: Challenges for Business Engagement in the Social Sciences*

## Funding Opportunities

Following the initial workshop to identify key challenges related to funding for social sciences business engagement funding, the BECoP hosted a facilitated discussion between the Aspect members and the UK's primary funder of social science research and a network of knowledge brokers to hear how they are working to address these challenges, and what funding is available. Additional notes from the facilitated discussion are available to BECoP members and others upon request. The additional notes address the following topics: Flexible Funding, Social Sciences Leadership, Increasing Funding Timeframes, and Appetite for Risk.

### **Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)**

The ESRC is the main funder of social science research in the UK. Over the last decade it has attempted to support and encourage engagement through two dedicated business engagement mechanisms: its Impact Acceleration Accounts including the Accelerating Business Collaboration (ABC) fund and NPIF Fellows

which specifically aim at encouraging postgraduate and early career researcher collaboration with business; and the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund, where social sciences have a key role in ensuring the challenges have impact .

The IAA funding have been very successful for the 26 research institutions that hold an IAA as well as the 14 Doctoral Training Partnerships. The ESRC engages directly with senior business leaders and insight from these interactions reveal that very often business challenges, whatever the size of business, are frequently social science in nature rather than technological. Recognising that there is an unmet demand for social science knowledge transfer, ESRC in partnership with Innovate UK is running two pilots to understand how this mechanism can better meet both social science and business needs. The pilot runs from for one year starting 1 April 2021 and will report to Innovate UK and ESRC with recommendations for how KTPs could be adapted in the future.

ESRC Strategic Lead: Interdisciplinarity and Impact, commented:

*“The KTP pilot stems from evidence that businesses value and need social science skills to innovate, but don’t necessarily frame or see their challenges in terms of economic impact. Together with Innovate UK we want to better understand how the KTP scheme can be utilised to meet broader business challenges that can deliver many benefits for the participating companies and associates.”*

## **KTN**

KTN’s (formerly the Knowledge Transfer Network) role in the UK innovation ecosystem is to *“create diverse connections to drive positive change”*, to shape the innovation communities of the future. One part of the mission is to manage the KTP programme on behalf of Innovate UK, the principal funder. KTP’s are business-led innovation projects established between a business and an academic partner who has knowledge that can be further developed and transferred to the business to accelerate growth. Management KTP’s are a special category of KTP introduced in 2019 to enable businesses to adopt state of the art management practices which will improve business productivity.

At the interface between funders, researchers and businesses, KTN acknowledges that there can be tensions between funders’ expectations and criteria and business needs. For businesses, particularly SMEs, experience has shown that partnerships with social science researchers present challenges such as finding a clear pathway to financial return, having the internal bandwidth and time to fully engage with a project to realise its full value, and having clarity on how social

science research can be practically implemented in a business environment. KTN advocates that the route to success for business engagement funding is co-creation and co-design with businesses and ensuring that any scheme allows space for collaboration and experiential learning within the project.

## Takeaways

The facilitated discussion challenged the group to imagine a new funding scheme that could address the issues identified. Our wide ranging discussion crystallised for us that any attempt to correct issues with social science business engagement funding schemes must go hand in hand with measures to address all of the four issues identified in Box 1. Only by working collectively with social science leaders, universities, funders and businesses will improvements to the practice and implementation of social sciences business engagement be delivered.

## Where next?

Below is our attempt to prioritise the key challenges and offer suggestions of what is needed from universities, funders and social science leaders to advance possible solutions.

Key challenge	How important/ urgent is this challenge to getting better business engagement in social sciences? (H/M/L)	Who is best placed to address this challenge?
<p><b>The value proposition:</b> social scientists have the language (and confidence) to articulate and defend the 'value' of social science activities and outcomes thus influencing the measures of value set by others.</p>	<p><b>High:</b> important for senior social science leaders to communicate value proposition to range of different audiences to motivate engagement and to report outcomes. Need to communicate value effectively to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social science staff</li> <li>• Senior university leadership</li> <li>• Potential business collaborators</li> <li>• Funders</li> </ul>	<p><b>Social Science Leaders:</b> those with experience of working with business are essential to leading the discussion on alternative measures of value.</p> <p><b>Funders:</b> the design of programme reporting mechanisms might be one way to positively influence concepts of value.</p> <p><b>Universities:</b> as influencers with connections at local, regional and national levels universities are well positioned to help articulate and defend social science value.</p>

<p><b>Tailored funding schemes:</b> that facilitate long-term, relationship-building models of engagement, rather than transactional interactions, with appropriate, flexible timeframes; new outcome measures; a more flexible risk portfolio; and budget rules that accommodate a flow of scale from smaller to larger.</p>	<p><b>High:</b> very important as the design of the funding, the expectations and assumptions attached, shapes the value that is created and the type of collaboration and innovation that happens.</p>	<p><b>Funders</b> ultimately design the schemes, but they should consistently seek input from those that will apply for and use them: businesses, universities and social scientists</p>
<p><b>Internal university structures:</b> rethinking organisational structures and strategies to make it more likely that social science is considered for business engagement and social scientist are more likely to access that support.</p>	<p><b>Medium:</b> this is assigned moderate importance as changes described above should 'filter through' to positively impact perceptions of value and thus increase business engagement opportunities for social scientists.</p>	<p><b>Universities</b> should review internal business engagement and tech transfer organisation to ensure they facilitate and smooth the process for social science business engagement.</p>
<p><b>Unfamiliarity:</b> more social scientists perceive their research as having as much relevance and applicability to the private sector as to non-commercial organisations and so have greater confidence in engaging.</p>	<p><b>Low:</b> schemes such as IAA and ABC are already in place and helping to overcome the unfamiliarity challenge, especially for ECRs. ASPECT has a huge wealth of case studies and information with examples of academics speaking about their collaborations and societal outcomes.</p>	<p><b>Funders and Universities:</b> continue to signpost and encourage social scientists and generate and promote case studies and material.</p>

# Aspect

## Transforming Society Through Social Science Innovation

Aspect (A Social sciences Platform for Entrepreneurship, Commercialisation and Transformation) is a network for organisations looking to make the most of commercial and business opportunities from social sciences research.

Supported by Research England's Connecting Capability Fund, Aspect members sit at the epicentre of discovery, imagination and progress in the social sciences. We draw together pioneering academics with innovative industry leaders to tackle the most complex societal challenges of our time.



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