

Aspect



Innovation Fellows Project Report

The University of Manchester



August 2021



1. Background

Driving greater academic engagement with the Aspect Network was identified in the CCF bid as an important strategic objective for the programme. In a recent internal survey, Aspect members identified increased academic engagement as a top priority for the second wave of Aspect funding. The 'Innovation Fellows' project sought to pilot an approach to meeting this objective through the development of a cohort of academic champions at the universities of Manchester and Oxford, with the intention of providing a potential starting point to extend and build on across the partnership in Aspect's second phase.

The project at Manchester sought to build on Oxford's already running Innovation Fellowships initiative. Manchester received a total of £15K to run Innovation Fellows at the university.

The aim for the pilot was to lay the groundwork for a future phase of Innovation Fellowships that could become a flagship programme of the Aspect Network. Fellows would have a key role in building awareness among researchers of the benefits of social sciences innovation, with the Fellowship acting as a crucial 'carrot' to engaging the academics.

The initiative at Manchester recruited two Fellows to organise a programme of activities to raise the profile of research commercialisation, business engagement and entrepreneurship among academics. In exchange for this activity, the Fellows were each awarded £5K for use on a research, impact, or engagement activities of their choosing. An additional shared £5K events budget was made available to the Fellows.

2. Project Activities

The project at Manchester kicked off in Q1 2021 with recruitment from early February. There was some difficulty getting traction on the call when circulated, receiving fewer applications than expected. However, we did manage to recruit one fellow, Ser-huang Poon. A Professor of Finance at Alliance Manchester Business School (AMBS), Ser-huang is an alumnus of the [SUCCESS](#) programme (now the ARC Accelerator) through her social enterprise, [Enduring Net](#).

A subsequent recruitment was then rolled out to identify a second Innovation Fellow. This call received more attention, possibly due to the length of the call being

extended and it being circulated more widely, leading to a greater number of applications.

Three candidates were interviewed, leading to the selection of Ricardo Climent, Professor of Interactive Music Composition at the School of Arts, Languages, and Culture (SALC). Ricardo is also an alumnus of the SUCCESS programme through his start-up social enterprise [Keep it Human](#). His selection over other candidates was due to his proposed programme of activities being better structured and better aligned with the aims of the Innovation Fellowship pilot.

The planning and roll-out of the two Fellow's programmes of activities was more challenging than expected, with the Fellows needing to balance their Fellowship activity alongside their usual teaching and research responsibilities. These difficulties were exacerbated by the delays in recruitment meaning that the rollout clashed with exams and marking.

After some delays, Ricardo and Ser-huang were able to deliver their activities as Innovation Fellows; due to time constraints, Ser-huang had to cut down her the size of her planned programme of activities, whilst Ricardo's activity had to be rescoped. His planned collaboration with FutureEverything was adapted into production of a video providing a guide for social science academics through the process of seeking early stage funding for spin-outs or social enterprises.

Both Fellows ran their activities entirely online due to COVID-19 restrictions, and attendance at their events was widened to allow non-academic participants to join, increasing the visibility of their activity and of Aspect 'brand'.

3. KPIs and Outcomes

Overall, the activity was a moderate success with Ser-huang's fellowship activity receiving 25 attendees and Ricardo's receiving a total of 35 (with 262 views on social media after the fact). Reflecting their background as experienced social science entrepreneurs and SUCCESS alumni, the webinars and workshops ran by both fellows had a strong social enterprise and entrepreneurship slant. Reception of the events was positive, with informal feedback from participants noting that they found the content of the events inspiring and practically oriented.

Despite all the Fellows busy schedules, Oxford and Manchester were able to organise a collaborative

meeting, at which the fellows from each university had an opportunity to meet and discuss their activities.

In terms of their own experience on the project, the two Fellows said:

Ser-huang Poon:

“The Innovation Fellows programme has helped to connect the Fellows to share experience, which can be a useful support as we are at a similar stage of development. The Innovation Fellow workshop and webinar series are instrumental in giving us opportunities to showcase our projects and to network.”

Ricardo Climent:

“Aspect Innovation Fellow programme was instrumental in helping Keep•It•Human to understand key questions at the intersections of FinTech, video-gaming and philanthropic giving to validate our proposition. It is clearly a must-apply for any deserving academic willing to boost her/his transition from research to social entrepreneurship.”

4. Additional Learnings

The Innovation Fellowships pilot at Manchester faced a number of difficulties in implementation; it would therefore be advisable for any future iteration of the Fellowships approach to note these and take steps to mitigate against them in future.

- The first and most persistent difficulty in the project was the delays encountered due to a number of factors, including COVID-19 and the Fellows’ own busy schedules. A future phase of the programme would be advised to allow much more time when planning to account for any delays in recruitment and then delivery. Academics are busy people, so providing extra time over which the Fellowship can be delivered is of vital importance.
- Another difficulty encountered was around communications with academics. The ‘grant in exchange for activity’ structure of the award was unfamiliar to all but one of the academics that applied, which led to some confusion about the nature of the project from applicants. This was mitigated by editing the call to further clarify the distinction between the £5K award provided for a research, impact or engagement activity of the fellow’s choosing and the programme of activities they were required to run as fellows. However, in future it would be advisable to

coordinate more thoroughly with colleagues in Comms and Marketing on this issue. This would also ensure that the circulation of the opportunity is better targeted to ensure maximum visibility by potential applicants.

Very few applications to take part were received from academics previously unconnected with Aspect. In practice, the applications from Aspect alumni tended to be better aligned with the aims and ethos of Innovation Fellows than were those from academics new to Aspect. In retrospect, this was not surprising: academics already familiar with Aspect are much more likely to be interested and engaged in innovation activities than those who have not previously engaged. They were also more likely to have a better understanding of what the programme is looking for from applicants.

Ser-huang and Ricardo both had access to networks of fellow academics who were unfamiliar with Aspect and its aims and they were able to leverage these during their Fellowships, fulfilling the aims of the pilot programme. In doing so, our Innovation Fellows, working with the Aspect team at Manchester, were able to start to build a bigger cohort of academics, supporting the ultimate aim of the Fellowships and the wider Aspect programme: increased academic engagement in innovation, entrepreneurship and research commercialisation in social sciences.

Future iterations of the Fellowships scheme might include a focus on reaching academics who are not already engaged in Aspect, with the intention of building greater diversity of thought and background into the Innovation Fellows cohorts.

About Aspect

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.

Find out more at www.aspect.ac.uk

Aspect

Transforming Society Through
Social Science Innovation



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