

# Aspect

## Ideas Box Report

### Aspect Business Engagement CoP

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## 1 Introduction

- 1.1** This report reflects upon an array of interlocking barriers to social sciences business engagement. In particular it considers the increasing emphasis, from various quarters, on how Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should address traditionally low levels of activity. The analysis builds upon findings from Aspect's 2019 activity mapping exercise, which outlined that:

*"Common challenges identified by members were related to communications and/or resources and models for supporting social sciences exploitation... Social sciences commercialisation pathways can be different to STEM, and KE and commercialisation professionals require dedicated time and resources to develop their internal capabilities and revise their processes in order to best support these different pathways."*<sup>1</sup>

- 1.2 Background:** Following a number of conversations within the Aspect Business Engagement Community of Practice (BE-CoP) the short project upon which this report is based set out to interrogate a simple question: **what are the main barriers to surfacing opportunities for business engagement within the social sciences?** This recognises that whilst strategies exist for dealing with problems of 'fit' between traditional views of HEI business engagement in the social sciences, we spend little time reflecting upon the number of opportunities that lay undiscovered.
- 1.3** A range of factors inform debates around how HEIs might transform business engagement structures to better support the social sciences; these generally coalesce around two themes. Firstly, engagement makes research better, both substantively and in terms of its ability to reflect the requirements of different types of funder. Secondly, some engagement will lead to outcomes that are of institutional significance, in terms of either commercial viability or institutional visibility (and preferably both).
- 1.4** When scoping this work, it was commented that *'the crux of this is finding out where early stage business engagement ideas go to die'*. This may sound offhand, but it speaks of the fast moving nature of knowledge exchange. Opportunities need to be plucked out of the stream of HE 'business as usual'. This can only be done in a proactive manner.

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<sup>1</sup> ['Aspect Learning Report 2020'](#) (Oxentia, November 2020)

- 1.5** The analysis presented here builds upon earlier work from the Aspect Business Engagement Community of Practice (BE-CoP), which considered the issue of funding mechanisms, sketching four key barriers: unfamiliarity with the private sector; the struggle to easily articulate the ‘value’ of activities and outcomes with businesses; internal university structures; and unsuitable funding schemes. The work concluded that *“any attempt to correct issues with social science business engagement funding schemes must go hand in hand with measures to address [...] the four issues identified.”*<sup>2</sup>
- 1.6** Rather than seeking to ‘re-invent the wheel’, this work considers the amelioration of ‘barriers’ as primarily a ‘research development’ question, rather than being the exclusive preserve of Knowledge Exchange (KE) professionals. A key premise, reflected within the conclusions presented, is that research development teams are central to the process of idea formation. This opens up a number of considerations for HEIs to consider as they seek to balance ‘general support’ with ‘professional expertise’.
- 1.7** **The project:** The initial plan was to circulate a survey across Aspect members. It was quickly realised that it would be more productive to focus on academic responses from one institution (the University of York), alongside professional services input from a wide range of comparator institutions.
- 1.8** As the [Aspect toolkit](#) demonstrates, there is a lot we already know about the barriers to business engagement. This work builds upon this, rethinking how we address a range of legitimate concerns, not to resolve them, but rather to consider an array of practical actions that might clarify and enhance the status of business engagement within the research development process.
- 1.9** Surveys were undertaken: with social sciences researchers and PhD students at the University of York, and professional services staff at a number of institutions (including York)<sup>3</sup> (specifically across the Aspect membership

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<sup>2</sup> [‘Briefing Note: Funding Challenges for Social Science Business Engagement’](#) (S. Walcott & R. Walters, March 2021)

<sup>3</sup> Respondents were allowed to self-identify as social scientists (or working with social scientists), and additional data supplied suggested that this approach did not lead to any anomalous responses.

and several HEIs involved in the delivery of the ESRC NPIF-ABC<sup>4</sup> funding award).<sup>5</sup> This was supplemented via a number of conversations, and two facilitated Zoom meetings, with Aspect and NPIF-ABC attendees respectively.

- 1.10** All the surveys administered considered three sets of barriers to business engagement (disciplinary, internal and external), along with some subsidiary questions around support structures. Some responses covered more than one area at a time, which was to be expected. For instance, barriers to communication that were perceived as being co-generated between universities and a range of external actors.
- 1.11** In considering the NPIF-ABC award, we were able to tap into a 'live' example of how a specific intervention, designed to support institutions in refreshing business engagement support structures, worked in practice. In particular, it was noted that the award was used by some to completely rethink how engagement outside of the management and business disciplines worked at their institutions. For others it was opportune. One respondent commenting that the award *"coincided with increased investment in business engagement support from the TTO<sup>6</sup>, so was timely in fostering excellent relationships between the TTO, ESRC IAA and other support for knowledge exchange."*
- 1.12** The wider message, reflected across all respondents, was that many barriers appear initially insurmountable, given the internal and external restrictions on how such funding is and can be used.<sup>7</sup> Gains are thus limited to awareness raising, a better understanding of capacity issues, and the testing out of targeted initiatives (including staff and student mobility). As one respondent reflected: *"NPIF-ABC has offered great opportunities but it has felt very much as an 'add-on' and it hasn't been properly integrated*

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<sup>4</sup> A one year funding pot (2020-21) provided by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to 26 ESRC Impact Acceleration Account (IAA) holding institutions to support capacity building in social sciences business engagement and commercialisation.

<sup>5</sup> All [74] survey responses, and material from the focus groups, have been anonymised. To further protect anonymity, the identification of responses from specific surveys is largely avoided.

<sup>6</sup> Technology Transfer Office.

<sup>7</sup> Or indeed the *perception* of how it can be used.

*into [our] institutional plans. It has felt very much like a 'lone voice' amongst the other activities and opportunities taking place."* In our conclusions, we consider some mechanisms to combat the short termism in-built into this kind of scheme.<sup>8</sup>

- 1.13 Future initiatives:** The potential exists to build upon this scoping work, including but not limited to: the roll out of the survey within other HEIs; focused workshops on the social sciences 'offer', and how this can be best refined and communicated; action research within HEIs who are considering a refresh of their business engagement support structures; and the formation of groups/coalitions of HEIs who seek build and increase capacity by working together on key support activities (something one respondent termed '*best practice plus*'). Many of these issues are being considered by BE-CoP members ahead of Aspect Phase 2.
- 1.14** In the post REF submission landscape, there also exists a critical opportunity to weave these considerations into how HEIs manage their impact and KE pipelines. A key finding of the survey, backing up the experience of many research impact professionals, is that it is largely unhelpful to single out social sciences business engagement as a special case (albeit recognising that it may, in numerous instances, require specialist support).

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<sup>8</sup> As one response summarised, "*The commercialising research call by ESRC is the third in just under four years, with very similar objectives and structures.*"

## 2 Disciplinary Barriers

**2.1** It was notable that many of our respondents felt that giving voice to (*specific*) disciplinary barriers was an important precursor to addressing 'root concerns' around business engagement in *general*. This was expressed both in terms of the social sciences being a special case, as well as the needs, expectations and norms of individual disciplines.

**2.2** With some frequency, the **status of social science** was brought up in terms of the self-presentation of its practitioners:

*"In my view Social scientists do themselves a disservice by relying on expert status and not demonstrating an understanding of the needs of different types of organisation and identifying with the issues [business] managers face - without allowing those to dominate"*

**2.3** This view was supplemented by the associated realisation that perceptions were often based upon misunderstandings - *"perhaps we should inform ourselves better about this sector so that we are not prejudiced"*, albeit these observations were tempered with expected and reasonable caveats around business being 'money driven', and the diverse ways that this is both expressed, and perceived, by both academics and those who seek to promote social sciences business engagement.

**2.4** The lack of understanding between 'two different worlds' was also noted by professional services respondents, including the inherent *"difficulty for businesses and business broker organisations to understand what social science is and what it can contribute... [alongside both] social scientists, and us as business engagement/KE professionals, not being able to clearly articulate this either."* This was echoed by respondents who had experience of both 'worlds':

*"As someone who has worked in industry and academia, I find the biggest barriers are that businesses think that social science is easy and anyone can do it and that social scientists are a very varied lot and disciplines get muddled up."*

**2.5 Suggestion:** spaces for mutual learning should be generated, that are not only responsive to business need, but are also sensitive to the reservations felt by the academic community:

*"Businesses aren't sure what they can get from social scientists. Social scientists feel more comfortable with policy and third sector partners as more natural bedfellows for collaboration and don't often think about private sector partnerships as a way of furthering their research or impact. There is a moral stance that business is bad and morally corrupt and that public funds shouldn't be supporting business collaborations, the feeling being that businesses should be paying their own way."*

**2.6** Of course, in some instances these reservations can be backed up by clear evidence. The mediating role of the KE broker in assessing 'legitimate opportunities' was provided as one example where HEIs can offer a degree of support, and indeed protection.<sup>9</sup>

**2.7** When considering the disciplinary mix presented by the social sciences, there was a perception that (*this*) Government favours some forms of social science over others, for instance behavioural economics. Correspondingly, another respondent remarked that a focus on 'nudge' has meant that these methodologies *"have become the only way that businesses think about social drivers, which is a very bad position to begin with, or they see technology as the first step for trying to solve what is actually a social and cultural need."*

**2.8** Equally, there was a sense that social scientists are often willing to back themselves into disciplinary corners: *"too many times academics themselves are not very willing to work across the different disciplines of social science to best provide what business needs."* One sees echoes of this dilemma in recent debates around generating a new funding agency, UK ARPA<sup>10</sup>, to counterbalance the disciplinary structure of the funding councils under UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The potential value of ethnographic investigation in order to provide 'real life' case studies, was also suggested.

<sup>10</sup> Advanced Research Projects Agency

<sup>11</sup> House of Commons Science and Technology Committee ([Third report: A new UK research funding agency](#) HC778), 12 February 2021



- 2.9** A range of viewpoints were presented, many of which were refracted through the lens of disciplinary norms. However, two features emerged clearly. Firstly, a repeated refrain that some forms of social sciences KE are inherently value driven, and this cannot simply be dismissed or (momentarily) brushed under the carpet. Accordingly, social sciences researchers do not generally exhibit a salesperson's approach, and may not seek the easiest or simplest solution (i.e. quick wins) in quite the way that a business might expect or require. Secondly, the 'rules of engagement' around HEI business engagement, in terms of demand-led schemes and opportunities (including funding mechanisms, such as KTP<sup>12</sup>), alongside traditional KE markers of success (such as generating IP or spin-outs), do not 'work' for a vast swath of the social sciences.
- 2.10 **Suggestion:** Discussions around interdisciplinarity should include recourse to the issue of how different social sciences disciplines both attract and engage with different categories of research user.**
- 2.11** The message here, as one survey respondent summarised, is that the 'starting point' for engagement differs: *"my perception of business is that they are profit-driven. Social science researchers tend to be issue-driven."* How those issues *themselves* manifest will differ between disciplines. Within this fuzzy dichotomy lies a range of approaches, attitudes, and rationales for engagement. The learning point here is that a diversity of goal orientations should be priced into engagement, rather than either ignored or endlessly scrutinised.
- 2.12** As one response succinctly stated, *"knowledge exchange should mean knowledge exchange"*, and this should include honest discussions around the potential benefits of engagement for all parties, including a consideration of additional interventions that might be required to keep discussions 'on track'. For instance, one respondent challenged their peers by suggesting that there is *"a perception of too much focus by institutions on one-way academic knowledge sharing rather than business improvement and the bottom line."* The question that one might therefore ask is, what do HEIs need to do not only to promote mutual understanding, but also to assist in the support of activity that – to provide one potential

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<sup>12</sup> Knowledge Transfer Partnership (funded via Innovate UK).

scenario – an individual academic might decide is *potentially* worthwhile, yet at the same time does not seemingly represent ‘good value’ regarding career progression or the generation of research outcomes.

- 2.13** But is even this a bridge too far? The survey received many responses similar to this one below, and on occasion phrased in less temperate terms:

*“Businesses think that they can hire researchers to create evidence to support a profit orientated agenda, that is not what social sciences exist for. The main barriers are that the business sector and the social sciences are diametrically opposed.”*

- 2.14** **Suggestion:** universities refine their business engagement offer, highlighting the diversity of the ‘business sector’, and the many routes to/models of engagement that are possible.

- 2.15** On the face of it this approach seems self-evident, but is also something that does not seem to be happening. Whilst excavating the reasons for this is beyond the scope of this small-scale investigation, the key issue appears to be around the lack of time and resource provided to social scientists to undertake developmental activities that present an unclear return on investment, and are not prioritised by disciplinary based organisational units (usually departments).

- 2.16** One respondent phrased this as a warning, albeit one that offers pointers on how professional services staff might approach this issue:

*“The major disciplinary barrier is therefore protecting the validity and reliability of unbiased and respected research, if that barrier is removed, then the respect given to social science research at the university removing the barrier will diminish.”*

- 2.17** The subtext here is that support structures are often not constructed with the primary goal of ‘protecting’ social sciences research in this manner. Likewise, another respondent noted the need for a *quid pro quo*, something more likely with long term (and strategic), rather than short-term (and transactional) relationships: *“there would have to be compromises on both sides – e.g. researchers letting go of the aspects of their research that are not attractive to business. Businesses accepting that some things are worth doing even if they do not make a profit”*

- 2.18 Suggestion:** Models that engage with business partners around fundamental research questions should be supported and adequately resourced and/or subsidised.
- 2.19** We consider a range of barriers in the next two sections that are more ‘structural’ in nature, but many come down to the same two points, the first more obvious, the second more concealed. Firstly, academics and businesses often don’t see the **need to understand each other’s primary drivers**. Secondly, HEIs and businesses are often blind to the **diversity of approaches presented by the social sciences**, and their applicability to real world problems.
- 2.20** The key message is for HEIs to control what they can, within a framework that balances support for, and the encouragement to pursue, demand-led opportunities, against disciplinary and wider strategic (institutional) research objectives. This will look slightly different for each HEI.
- 2.21** Within this support structure, a wider range of KE, business engagement and research impact practitioners should be encouraged to work together, undertaking a range of tasks including but not limited to: matching academics to partners; mediating differences in language – *“we were talking about the same thing but using a different language”*;<sup>13</sup> reflecting upon missed or stymied opportunities;<sup>14</sup> and being alive to the differences between bad faith players, and bad experiences, which may overlap but are demonstrably distinct.
- 2.22** Ultimately, the takeaway point is that a lack of understanding of what social science ‘is’ reaches into HEIs themselves, and is not simply a feature of the business-HEI interaction. In the next section this issue is considered further.

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<sup>13</sup> i.e. the same words meaning different things, but also on occasion different words meaning the same things.

<sup>14</sup> e.g. situations where engagement was perceived as too hard, too complex, or a ‘resource drain’.

### 3 Internal Barriers

- 3.1** Institutional barriers to business engagement are well known, and the responses received in this survey cover familiar ground, summarised by one respondent as *“basically a lack of infrastructure to support with engaging, as well as lacking incentives”*. Nonetheless, it’s still informative to review each of these themes in the light of previous remarks.
- 3.2** **Structural barriers:** The usual suspects made repeated appearances, particularly what might be termed ‘uneven bureaucracy’ where, as one respondent eloquently framed it, *“at times it makes those doing what the University desperately wants us to do feel like fraudsters.”* At the same time, there was disagreement amongst all groups of respondents as to whether the ‘generalisation’ of support structures had gone too far, with others pointing to a belief that support for business engagement seemed *too* specialised. Was this merely manifestations of the ‘wrong’ type of generalism/specialism that were being critiqued?
- 3.3** The takeaway point is that oftentimes support is simply misaligned. As one professional service respondent observed, at their institution *“internal competition within business development teams means contacts [and processes] aren’t readily shared”*. Similarly, another respondent, in an allied role, acknowledged that:
- “At present, we don’t have a dedicated business engagement team to help facilitate connections with organisations, so it is challenging to identify and build relationships outside of the ‘usual suspects’.”*
- 3.4** **Suggestion:** HEIs should address the structural problems recognised within social sciences business engagement support in terms of **responsively, and judiciously, coupling need to capacity.**
- 3.5** Above all, interventions must be ‘evidence based’ (i.e. what does our research base compel us to do), rather than *only* responsive to business need. Many professional services respondents were left wondering whether this was a particular problem for *their* organisation – a similarity of responses across the survey and focus groups suggested that it wasn’t. Different views were presented to the question of where the social sciences ‘fit’ into a support structure, this response being typical:

*“Capacity among academic staff is the greatest barrier, [but I’m] not sure whether this is institutional? We have also had an issue with business engagement sitting in the TTO who had little understanding of social science, however this has changed with a change in staff and more investment.”*

- 3.6 Incentives:** This, above all, speaks to the balance required between what one could term ‘structural incentives’ – whether HEIs feel there is a need to resource social sciences business engagement support, and ‘academic incentives’ – whether opportunities that emerge are felt to be worth pursuing, given other pressures and priorities. As one academic affirmed:

*“My job specification is teaching, admin and research, so unless the partnership is to apply a specific method that I developed in my research and thus closely related to the impact of my research, it is not part of my job specification.”*

- 3.7** The terrain here is uneven. The same could also be said for synergies, or otherwise, between KE and teaching. Indeed, one might suggest that it is within the catch-all category of ‘admin’, that HEIs could be more proactive in freeing up academics to pursue KE opportunities, particularly those of a strategic value to the institution.
- 3.8** Critically, some academics will find that the application of their research is relatively seamless, and various forms of engagement may also contribute to the richness of ongoing research activity. Others will find that pursuing KE opportunities generates a lot of additional work, much of which is perceived as ‘low value’ and not contributing to career development and/or the development of the research in question. This comment was typical of this dilemma: *“we’re not rewarded for knowledge exchange and its outputs as much as more traditional papers etc. You would struggle to get promoted just through working with businesses.”*
- 3.9** This is a well-known issue, that most knowledge exchange and impact strategies butt up against at some stage. Again, the main issue here is to foster an approach that at the very least prevents ideas from withering on the vine because one academic, at a particular moment in time, is unable to

advance them. At that point open discussion can take place around the contested nature of KE prioritisation:

*“Researchers have many demands on their limited time and business engagement is often not prioritised. Opportunities are often not very visible and are presented as peripheral to academic activity such as publishing and disseminating research”*

**3.10** Mainstreaming business engagement within the social sciences requires tangible steps. A significant part of this involves permitting the space for these conversations to happen within the normal flow of research development. HEIs must openly address the fact that KE incentives (and indeed the form taken by many KE deliverables) are misaligned, at the same time as recognising that some engagement will require greater levels of structural support. This is neither a zero-sum game, nor one where support can be standardised and provided equally. As one respondent framed it, *“this involves recognising the pressures that different social scientists are under and [also] providing external parties with the sense that the university is responsive to their needs”*.

**3.11** Nevertheless, a note of caution. HEIs can only control what they can control, and changing the culture of individual social sciences disciplines from the inside is a knotty problem. As one respondent stated:

*“Career progression in social sciences does not need business engagement and I personally think that local businesses would prefer to talk to business-friendly universities with a record of interaction.”*

**3.12** **Suggestion:** Processes for social science business engagement should emerge from a combination of strategic engagements and relationships emerging out of the course of ‘research as normal’.

**3.13** Emerging from the survey was also an awareness that dogmatic neutrality towards business partners – ‘the university is open for business’ – isn’t an effective mechanism to underpin the space required to foster a healthy KE culture. At the very least, processes should be underpinned by a discussion of how priorities at different institutional levels can be, if not resolved, then managed.

**3.14** A related point, that came out strongly, was that HEIs often over-complicate, and yet at the same time under-theorise, engagement activities involving the social sciences. On the one hand the social sciences were expected to embrace models and approaches built around the needs of STEM subjects: *“KT partnerships are great, but the level of investment required from the partner means these cannot be and cannot be pitched to academics as a starting point.”* On a practical level, this meant that HEI approaches are habitually viewed as overly confusing, *when often a (fairly) simple commercial transaction is being proposed by an external partner.*

*“It could be that there is a need to view relationships with business in a way that says ‘we realise the majority of these will not yield big results or big partnerships, but we are prepared to take reasonable risks.’”*

**3.15** However, on the other hand, many examples that are presented to academics as ‘effective engagement’ were often viewed as unhelpful. One respondent maintained that: *“the case studies that are used as examples for us are at a scale that shows the end result, rather than the development of relationships that can take us to that point”*.<sup>15</sup>

**3.16** Funding via mechanisms such as Aspect and NPIF-ABC<sup>16</sup> have proven useful in bolstering support that is sensitive to the needs of social scientists, and recognising the need to factor necessary amounts of risk into social sciences KE funding. However, the task of integrating this type of activity across research and enterprise directorates, however they are constituted, is clearly still ongoing. A professional services respondent noted the particular difficulties at their institution, a constant refrain within a later focus group: *“business engagement staff are funded through external grants and while the aims of these grants can complement those at the University, it won’t be fully aligned to the College strategy.”*

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<sup>15</sup> Respondents also said similar things with respect to using Research Excellence Framework (REF) impact case studies as exemplars.

<sup>16</sup> And the more recent ESRC Commercialising Research out of Social Sciences (CRoSS) funding pot (2021-23) provided to 26 ESRC Impact Acceleration Account (IAA) holding institutions, *“to expand opportunities and build the capability and capacity of social science researchers to move the outputs of their research along the commercialisation pathway.”*

**3.17** Ultimately, to enact any of the suggestions above, champions are required at various levels of the institution. As one professional services respondent recognised, when presented with a considerable resource for supporting business engagement activities, *“the very low appetite for this activity at our institution meant that the benefits of the funding weren't maximised and barriers were not overcome.”*



## 4 External Barriers

- 4.1** A feature of this work was the extent to which external barriers were often conflated with the internal and disciplinary barriers covered above. This suggests a broad comprehension of the structural problems intrinsic to the KE ecosystem. To do full justice to this issue would require a separate piece of work, alongside a thorough consideration of business needs and requirements.
- 4.2** Nevertheless, the message delivered by our HEI respondents was that businesses require a greater sense of what it is that social scientists *do*, and this must showcase the interplay between blue skies, applied and critical work. For instance: *“the business sector may not think that social sciences has anything to offer them – looking for technological advances from researchers rather than non-technological solutions.”* In other words, the role that the social sciences have in interrogating ‘technological fixes’ can offer value within a wider interdisciplinary endeavour.
- 4.3** Another common theme expressed by HEI respondents regarding their perceptions of external barriers, was around cost. This had several facets. Firstly, the external perception that universities were expensive partners. Secondly, a belief that available forms of subsidy to support business engagement invariably come with hidden costs around bureaucracy. Thirdly, the perception from some business partners that HEIs are, relatively speaking, cash rich. This leads to frustration in terms of their perceived right to access this (often local) resource, as well as knock-on effects regarding the perception of appropriate delivery timescales.
- 4.4** Without prompting, a considerable number of responses pointed to the barriers encountered during inter-HEI partnership working, including more than one reference to seemingly similar university processes ineffectively meshing, and *“partners not engaging with the purpose of funding properly.”* However, the benefits of inter-institutional engagement are clear:

*“With a mixture of funding programmes such as ASPECT and ABC, this can give an opportunity to deliver greater impact as these programmes have common objectives. Exploring ways to collaborate can help money and resources to go a longer way. However, this requires a level of*

*coordination, communication and structure which may not be established at individual institutions."*

- 4.5** Moreover, the value of programmes and those involved in them *also* working in tandem, was emphasised:

*"Programmes such as ASPECT are multi-year investments and without linking up with their infrastructure and community, the impact through ABC would have been diluted significantly."*

- 4.6** **Suggestion:** Clearer messaging around the social sciences 'offer' is required, which recognises both the value and limitations of a case study approach that *only* highlights successful examples of engagement, and is underpinned by a wider consideration of the purpose(s) of social science.

- 4.7** There was also a view that this offer must be supplemented with a clear sense of how HEIs will marshal resources to manage emergent projects. This was pointed to as a particular problem when academics had been left to 'fend for themselves'. Lack of support can also lead to the view that specific forms of engagement are untenable. For instance:

*"Though it seems from an HE perspective that businesses would want extra capacity through, for example, internships, placements, and secondments staffed by PhD students and ECRs, in reality they require resource to manage. Many businesses already operate on slim staffing and resource margins, so that form of collaboration isn't attractive."*

- 4.8** **Conclusions:** This small-scale piece of work has revealed barriers well recognised by KE professionals, also illuminating issues felt acutely by social science practitioners. The overall impression was of a desire to balance initiatives that seek to facilitate more effective business engagement with the social sciences, with those that seek to promote the wider social, cultural and economic value of the social sciences.

- 4.9** The surveys revealed a largely positive view of sharing information via exemplars, inter-HEI activity, and the scoping of opportunities within specific discipline areas, alongside a recognition that half-measures will not work:

*"Many of the barriers mentioned can only be overcome through developing a positive experience for business when they're introduced to*

*social science collaborations. This is aided by a dedicated professional services support team, who can invest the right level of time to support both the academic and the business.”*

**4.10 The key insight is that the major external barrier to social sciences business engagement is the challenge the social sciences present to ‘business as usual’, and the ways that this *could*, with the right levers, be harnessed for the benefit of all.** Along with the recognition that professional standards may be perceived differently, this also has implications for how HEIs seek to ‘sell’ their social sciences research expertise, and how the link to original research – be it in terms of research outcomes, expertise, or evidence – is presented.

**4.11** What does this mean in practice? Firstly, **a collective sense of endeavour tempered by pragmatism is required**, along with an acceptance that a substantial proportion of activity will fail to generate significant traction, but will at least contribute to institutional learning. As one respondent argued, by doing this, an HEI should, incrementally, be able to better assess which opportunities are worth pursuing, in the first instance *“probably need[ing] to accept limitations and look for areas where it is feasible and appropriate to work together”*.<sup>17</sup>

**4.12** Secondly, **critical voices must be engaged in the process**. This recognises that there will be a substantial number of academics who demonstrate various degrees of resistance to this agenda. For instance:

*“As a researcher, I have no interest in aiding the progression of capitalism/business for the reasons stated above. In fact, in order to prevent ecological collapse, it is in fact opposition to the progression of profit-making that is needed.”*

**4.13** Resistance should be constructively engaged with, and included within broader institutional discourse around the business engagement and wider research impact agendas. This speaks to a final point noted by a number of

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<sup>17</sup> The twin economic ‘shocks’ of Brexit and Covid-19 have arguably led to a reduced space for innovative engagement, and an increase in the need for time-critical advice. Interestingly, respondents didn’t cite these ‘shocks’ as significant concerns, perhaps pointing to the perception that *existing* barriers to engagement were more of a pressing and immediate issue.

professionals services respondents – that **the social sciences business engagement agenda must be connected to a wider impact pipeline that seeks to support, evaluate and communicate examples of university activity leading to measurable change.**<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Additionally, support for different forms of output must be provided, alongside clearer communications strategies. As one respondent framed it: *“Instead of one media office for the whole university which seems to predominantly focus on marketing and recruitment to current and future students, what we need is a full-time research, media and engagement officer placed in every academic department. These people could... work with them to issue press releases... put their work in front of the eyes of journalists, parliament select committees, opinion leaders, industry, professional associations, etc. Academics don't have the time or contacts to do this themselves. As a result, their research work is not noticed.”*

## 5 Recommendations

### 5.1 Scope and evaluate a greater range of models to incentivise business engagement with the social sciences.

This should be undertaken within cross-institutional professional KE practitioner networks, with models developed at a range of scales. It should include, but not be limited to, responsive funding approaches, an innovative approach to job descriptions, flexible models of workload allocation, and new approaches to cross-institutional working.

### 5.2 Focus incentives, investments and flexible funding on areas where evidence can be presented that blockages occur.

A number of respondents noted that targeted subsidies, including the ability to charge time flexibly to ongoing projects and on occasion engage in paid consultancy,<sup>19</sup> was vital. There was also a recognition that some HEIs were able to allocate and administer support, in various forms, far more effectively and efficiently than others.

### 5.3 Promote capacity building activities, including targeted training, for social sciences academics on how to engage with business.

This would include tailored material around expected themes (networking, project initiation, etc), as well as discipline sensitive guidance on how to communicate research findings and methodologies<sup>20</sup> to potential research users, as well as learn from models and techniques used by other sectors (e.g. the not-for-profit sector).

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<sup>19</sup> This is a controversial area – as one response stated: *“It is important academics are not just turned into consultants, otherwise we could all go off and be consultants and earn twice as much. The key is combining academic expertise with business”* – but it is also clear that institutional models and expectations differ, which has knock-on effects on how businesses perceive HEIs.

<sup>20</sup> As Aspect’s ‘Methods for Change’ project has argued, *“industry and civil society organisations may not see the ‘transformative potential’ of methods, rather understanding them primarily as ‘tools’ with which to collect data”* ([Methods for Change: Showcasing Innovative Social Science Methodologies](#), September 2021, p.20)

- 5.4 Provide informal and semi-formal spaces for the co-production of early-stage ideas with business.** These could be physical or virtual, and should be pitched at an appropriate level of specificity/subject area. These spaces would be supplemented via materials and activities that clearly outline, market, and promote the benefits of engagement, alongside the credentials of all parties involved.
- 5.5 Generate tangible low maintenance engagement pathways for business and academics to connect with one another.** For instance, via business focused ARI<sup>21</sup> documents – co-produced with business facing groups at a range of scales, semi-informal discussion spaces (e.g. via Zoom), or through a dedicated university presence in the region (e.g. a hub space located within an urban centre).
- 5.6 Produce disciplinary case studies highlighting where activities have been successful in the past, and demonstrating where real-world problems have been addressed.** Respondents noted the prevalence of solid examples of how the ‘game works’ in the STEM subjects, but decried a case study approach that too neatly packaged ‘outputs’ and ‘outcomes’ to the exclusion of process. Respondents also noted the ability of science communicators to clearly pinpoint the value of university generated STEM research.
- 5.7 Develop professional support structures that consider social sciences engagements through the lens of measurable change.** These could be linked to a core ‘research impact’ support offer, or tied to other institutional strategies and imperatives, at the functional level that makes sense for each HEI. Whatever the model chosen, these should be integrated with other allied functions (e.g. careers, student entrepreneurship, executive development, alumni engagement).
- 5.8 Combine institutional approaches to developing, managing, and maintaining business relationships, taking into account the needs of individual social science units** (be these departments, schools, research centres, etc). Respondents pointed to the value of stakeholder mapping

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<sup>21</sup> Modelled on the Areas of Research Interest (ARI) model pioneered by UK Government departments.

exercises, but added notes of caution around engaging in this activity without a clear sense of how links can be forged between institutional priorities and the research base.

**5.9 Consider where and when different forms of engagement are required, and seek to increase the range of individuals who could fulfil these roles.**

Developing internal fora with business facing staff, across a range of directorates, can underpin these considerations.

**5.10 Critically address the default position that engagement is ‘owned by academics’.** Knowledge translation projects, with business or otherwise, should be seen as co-produced, building on clear traditions within the social sciences disciplines to decentre ownership and leadership. In the first instance this will involve challenging traditional governance models (e.g. the most senior academic leading a project).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The obverse here is that whilst a greater range of projects could therefore be professional services led, institutional projects should seek the inclusion of a greater number of academic voices.

## About Aspect

Aspect (A SHAPE Platform for Entrepreneurship, Commercialisation and Transformation) is a network for organisations looking to make the most of commercial and business opportunities from social sciences, humanities and arts 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](http://www.aspect.ac.uk).

# Aspect



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