

Aspect

Innovation Disclosure Form – suggested modifications

Prepared by Dr R C Watson
(Director, Greenoak Innovation Ltd)
for the Aspect Research
Commercialisation Community
of Practice

August 2021



Introduction

For many Innovation / Knowledge Exchange Offices (IKE) the initial interaction with the academic team to discuss the opportunity will involve the completion of an innovation disclosure form (IDF), or similar titled record of the opportunity. The term IDF is used in the remainder of this document, but IKEs may wish to consider the terminology used with academics from the social sciences (for example by not modifying the name of an 'invention disclosure form' to an 'innovation disclosure form' are we perhaps putting off some colleagues from the social sciences who may not associate with the word invention?)

The IDF will either be sent to the academic team prior to the first meeting with the IKE to give the IKE representative an understanding of what the first meeting will involve, and a chance to prepare appropriate questions, gather supporting information to share with the academic team, or will be completed in the meeting itself.

IDFs can be e-documents or simple forms, which are usually then transposed onto central database of opportunities to allow them to be tracked through the commercialisation process.

Some IKEs have put their IDF online and enabled it to be accessed at all times to facilitate this process. Others prefer to have a modicum of control before the IDF is recorded on the central database to avoid recording opportunities that are not suitable to progress or avoid duplication, errors in completion etc before the form has been validated.

During the recent ASPECT consultation process¹ a few suggestions were mooted to change the IDF to make it more appropriate for social science based opportunities or as general improvements. Other suggestions are made by this author for ASPECT members to consider. Any modification would have to receive the support of other members of the host institution IKE and so these suggestions remain at the discretion of members who may feel they are not necessary for their particular set of circumstances.

1. Data Protection / GDPR considerations.

This suggestion is not intended to constitute legal advice and ASPECT members should seek support from their institution's data protection office or suitably qualified legal representative for specific advice.

Data will be fundamental to many new opportunities arising from research, including those from the social sciences. IKEs will undoubtedly be aware of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and adapted their processes accordingly, as this is an important legal obligation Institution-wide. However how many IDFs have been adapted by IKEs to ask about adherence to GDPR in **assessing** new opportunities?

Research procedures too will have already demanded, for legal and ethical reasons, that all research involving human subjects (including surveys, questionnaires, face to face interviews, etc) obtain informed consent from research subjects. Many of these consent agreements will now include terms relevant to GDPR, about contacting and consenting research subjects, the use of their personal information, other sensitive data, how long data is retained by the institution and what uses it may be put to.

However, for IKEs evaluating the opportunity it is essential that a check is made that these consents included permission for the commercial use of the outputs. If consent was only obtained for research and teaching and learning purposes only then the ability to commercialise the output may be jeopardised. It should be an early question asked for due diligence on the opportunity.

Depending on the number of research subjects and the complexity and expense of contacting them again to obtain consent for commercial purposes, the opportunity may not be viable to progress and perhaps this should be recorded early on in the process on the IDF to avoid wasting additional resources until this element has been investigated and rectified?

If external collaborators or research subjects were involved in the research, perhaps from different countries where GDPR or research ethics are different from the UK, then this should be investigated to ensure that their role in the generation and management of data is also

¹ Recent conversations with ASPECT partners 'ASPECT Research Commercialisation Community of Practice Toolkit Consultation' 2021 Greenoak Innovation on behalf of Research England Connecting Capabilities Fund

consistent with commercialisation. These discrepancies could be dealt with (if they are not already) in any Inter Institutional Agreement (IIA) signed with collaborators and agreeing commercialisation terms in general.

This is a complex area, and in specific cases the lack of 'commercial' use may not mean an end to the opportunity in every instance.

For example if subjects can be easily 're-consented' (or they can be re-canvassed with different consent to use their data for the new commercial proposition), or perhaps the research findings can be 'learned from' then adapted / refreshed for a new commercial version of the work, then it might not mean the opportunity is dismissed but needs a different strategy to progress.

Recording this on the IDF will at least flag up the potential that additional resources may be required before the opportunity can be progressed and the overall opportunity assessment will be better informed.

2. Recording of Social Science commercialisation awareness raising activities

The IDF could be used to record the effectiveness of awareness raising activities of the IKE in the social sciences areas. As subject areas which have traditionally not received as much attention in the past from IKE offices and perhaps been under represented a record of what is being done to raise awareness and activity from these areas would be valuable information. All ASPECT respondents in the recent consulting exercise mentioned the need to promote and explain the IKE process to social science audiences.

Most businesses would aim to ask every new customer 'where did you hear about us' as a measure of their promotional activities. Activities which provoked better responses, or responses of the right type will be repeated, those which have a poor response will be reduced or modified. IKEs could adopt this approach.

Many IKEs will give introductory talks, workshops etc on the importance of intellectual property, the ways in which research impact can be generated from economic / commercial activities. At some institutions a talk or information from the IKE is part of the induction of new academic employees.

Many will also hold workshops or informational events where academic teams can be educated as to the

type of opportunities that are most compatible with commercialisation.

Some IKEs will promote case studies or guest speakers to encourage participation in these events and new ideas to come forward. Occasionally specific subject areas, schools or faculties will be targeted for additional attention as they are perhaps underrepresented in invention disclosures – or they represent a particularly attractive area for new ideas – for example enquiries have been made of the IKE from investors or company contacts as to whether new ideas are available in these areas.

In summary, a good deal of time and resources are used to develop presentation materials, information leaflets, online guides, inviting external speakers etc. Giving the presentations and responding to enquiries that result from them also take time.

It would be sensible therefore to measure which of these activities generated the most interest of the 'right type' for the IKE to invest it (often) limit resources to best effect. If this could be done then the limited resources that IKEs invest in internal promotion could be deployed to best effect and be guided (at least in part) by internal customer demand rather than guess work.

The IDF could contain a check box section which enquired about what prompted the academic to come forward;

- Word of mouth recommendation from other colleague
- Past experience of IKE / Commercialisation project
- Leaflet, poster
- Website information
- Event (specific event?)
- Guest speaker
- External enquiry about their work

3. Previous Experience of Commercialisation 'Flag' on IDF

In most institutions the social sciences are subject areas which have not had an extensive track record of commercial activity especially when compared to their STEM counterparts. Indeed this is one of the reasons why the ASPECT project exists. It would not be fair to say that the knowledge of commercialisation amongst academic colleagues in social sciences is low *per se*, as many social scientist work in topics which are directly related to

commercial activities.

However, it is generally usually easier for the IKE to work with an academic or academic team who have had previous experience of commercialisation, either within the same institution or at a previous institution.

An experienced academic or team, whether successful or unsuccessful, in their previous attempts at commercialisation has built up knowledge of the processes that are ahead. This has a resource implication for the IKE – familiar ground does not need to be gone over again, some refreshment of knowledge and / or adaptation to the new project is needed but this is not the same as starting from a zero baseline with a team with no previous experience.

Whilst it is not suggested that this is a prejudicial point against the team approaching the IKE for the first time, perhaps recording prior experience of commercialisation on the IDF would flag to others in the IKE dealing with the opportunity that they did not have to start from scratch with explanations, did not need to send out basic information on certain topics, and this could save time, other resources and avoid unintentional repetition.

4. Aspirations / End Goals

IDFs tend to be factual, and intended to capture essential information to make a fair and reasonable assessment of the new opportunity. There could be an additional question which asks the academic team about their aspirations for the project. In STEM subjects the choices are usually but not exclusively licence or spinout to commercialise the associated intellectual property of the opportunity. Perhaps in Social sciences there are a wider set of choices and aspirations that need to be discussed at an early opportunity to ensure both IKE and Academic team are aligned? For example there may be routes other than spinout or license to consider such as social enterprise formation, charity formation, collaboration with other entities to form a company limited by guarantee, or other activities as yet undefined in a neat category which would increase the impact of the original research.

In the recent consultation exercise with ASPECT members, the importance of managing expectations and judging the motivation and aspirations of the academic team was mentioned by a number of respondents.

The IKE does not want to 'over promise and under deliver' to the academic team. However, the IKE is sometimes placed in the unenviable position of having to explain

to the academic team that their aspirations for the commercial outcome of the project are not matched by the enthusiasm of 'the market' – i.e. if the project is not 'commercially compatible' after early investigation of commercialisation routes – however excellent the research is, however valid the assertions of the research outputs are, the market at this time had not responded favourably.

By recording on the IDF could record the academic teams 'dream outcome' at least both parties would be aware of the desired outcome. This may not always come to pass, and as new information came to light it would be reviewed and changed as required. It would give a common destination for the project and perhaps define a satisfactory endpoint or an endpoint where both parties mutually acknowledge that to proceed further would not be warranted as the desirable goals were unlikely to be met.

E.g. Does the team want to 'spinout' or 'license' is there another motive that ideally would be accommodated? (job opportunities, personal motivations, others mentioned above etc)? Is the aim for maximum impact but no commercial gain is anticipated? Is the spinout intended to fulfil a certain mission then be disbanded? etc

Whilst no one can accurately predict the future, if there is a marker in the sand at this early stage of what the ideal 'end destination' is of the journey then at least both parties are aware of this and can plan accordingly.

E.g. If we cannot reach destination X due to market feedback, can we agree to go to destination Y instead? Would this offer IKEs more of an opportunity to manage those products which need to be signposted to other forms of support if the original commercialisation goal was mutually agreed to be unobtainable? Would it allow ambitions to be increased if favourable feedback was obtained (- we can now reach Z not X?).

5. Can we build a team around the idea?

ASPECT members commented on the need to build a team around the idea. The IDF may also be used to record early indications of the opportunity to do this. Some interviewees in the recent consultation mentioned that frequently in the social science area that the academic was more likely to be a lone worker within their domain, with perhaps a research student, but not necessarily

a large research group, which would represent the beginnings of a team to take the idea forward. If we contrast this with the STEM subjects then there are not the same number of team members attached to the stereotypical social science opportunity and therefore this may become an issue if not recorded and borne in mind at an early stage in proceedings.

Questions such as

- Is the principal academic team member behind the new opportunity willing to take this all the way on the commercialisation journey or will the help and support of others be needed?
- What other demands are on this principal / individuals involved which restrict their ability to progress the opportunity? (research, teaching, admin, etc)
- Are there existing collaborators inside or outside the institution who could be engaged to ensure that the opportunity is managed effectively – beyond the resources that the IKE can deploy?
- Link to Aspirations – what is the desired outcome for the individuals, and e.g. can we foresee commitment difficulties and mitigate these even at an early stage?

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