



Aspect

The SHAPE of things to come: current and future Aspect impact

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Aspect Members

Overview

In the five years since it launched, the Aspect programme has achieved a remarkable amount. As it approaches the latest milestone in its evolution, and to support the introduction of a new funding model, this project set out to achieve three key aims:

- To showcase the impact achievements of Aspect to date
- To highlight the future potential impact of Aspect and SHAPE commercialisation in general
- To equip Aspect to more effectively capture and report on its impact moving forwards.

The Aspect Network is a group of (at time of writing) 43 higher education institutions (HEIs) and partner organisations collaborating to support the emergence of new commercial opportunities from research in social sciences, humanities and the arts (SHAPE).

Since 2018, Aspect has built an ecosystem to support SHAPE commercialisation, helping to build relevant capacity and skills, gathering good practice and sharing knowledge around the challenges and opportunities commercialisation offers.

The foundation proposition is that emerging new ventures will ensure SHAPE research plays a strong role in directly contributing measurable benefits to UK economy and society. To demonstrate the success of that proposition, and reinforce the case for future funding and institutional participation, Aspect must be able to capture and show those economic and social benefits.

Given the time it takes to establish an ecosystem and to support a pipeline of innovators and ideas into real world business ventures, to date Aspect reporting has tended to focus on activities and *outputs*. This paper is the end result of a short project focused on supporting Aspect to take a substantive step towards capturing and reporting *outcomes* and (as far as possible) real world impacts.

The full paper sets out findings, insights and recommendations under the following headings:

1. Impact capture methodology
2. Pre-zero point impact assessment
3. Post-zero point impact assessment
4. Comparison to more mature SHAPE spin outs
5. Lessons for SHAPE commercialisation
6. Impact reporting conclusions and future approach

This paper offers an Executive Summary of the full report.

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 research.

While the commercialisation pipeline for STEM research is well established, the benefits and profile of research commercialisation within the SHAPE disciplines are less well known. Aspect seeks to redress this balance by connecting universities, businesses, academics, and industry leaders to turn ideas into commercial solutions and solve pressing social challenges.

Aspect aims to do this through a programme of events and meetings to exchange of good practice; funded projects to test ideas and pilot new approaches; and the development of toolkits (including case studies and resources) to share insights and learnings with the broader community.

Aspect seeks to:

- Raise the profile and significance of commercialising social sciences research
- Build engagement between academics, business, and industry
- Inspire and encourage social sciences commercialisation
- Grow capacity & expertise in social sciences research commercialisation
- Develop, share, and exchange knowledge and good practice

Executive summary: Aspect must grip the SHAPE of things to come

The Aspect programme of activity and Member network has generated positive outcomes for a significant number of individual academics and higher education institutions (HEIs) and is on a proven pathway to delivering measurable economic and social impacts for UK economy and society.

In this report, we go hunting for the strongest set of *outcome* proof points to ensure Aspect is able to fully demonstrate its impacts to critical audiences, including Members and new potential funders. We find a mixed picture.

We propose a theory of change model for the Aspect programme that maps from intention and funding through to intended outcomes and impacts across four critical stakeholders groups: academic-innovators, HEIs, corporate partners and UK economy and society. The data currently available goes reasonably far in demonstrating that the assumptions that underpin the Aspect intervention are correct and it is delivering its intended impacts.

However, whilst there is good but not comprehensive data to help showcase the more immediate impacts generated by Aspect's commercialisation support, now that Aspect is starting to progress greater numbers of innovators and innovative ideas into commercial trading models, a significant gap is being exposed around real world impact data.

We only need remind ourselves what the SHAPE stands for to be clear on the breadth of impacts we need to capture: Social Sciences, Humanities and the Arts *for People and the Economy*.

As Aspect continues to achieve success by growing the number of SHAPE spin outs emerging from its Member HEIs, it is mission-critical that the programme quickly puts in place a more rigorous and systematic approach to gathering relevant impact data, including economic, social and environmental impacts of its commercial projects.

Supporting new spin outs to collect this data is a potential win-win. Impact data is increasingly being required by investors and funders of start-ups as they grow. Providing support to innovators so that they can easily and effectively capture that data will benefit both themselves as well as Aspect and the HEIs from which the spinouts and wider commercialisation activity emerges.

Investment in commercialisation support is a long-term strategic choice. Lessons from the longer established STEM spin out activity tell us a typical successful project will take 10-15 years from when it is first disclosed before it reaches its full potential.

Aspect is only five years into its support journey, but as it increasingly starts to push commercial SHAPE propositions into the real economy it is vital that the baseline impacts

of those spin outs is fully captured. Without this, Aspect will struggle to show beyond doubt the value it is generating for the UK.

Analysis headlines

- Based on available data, Aspect is achieving what it set out to in building commercialisation capacity, drawing out SHAPE innovations within HEIs and supporting innovator-academics.
- In terms of real world *outcomes*, there are credible foundations in the data that Aspect is in the early stage of delivering its intentions to generate positive real world impact and has a strong potential to scale that impact.
- However, though KPI and annual Member survey data provide a strong baseline, there are significant data gaps. Critically there is not sufficient volume or quality of *outcome* data currently to fully demonstrate what has already been achieved.
- Analysis of comparable spin outs at a more mature stage suggests they too suffer from similar impact data gaps, but also reinforces the message that Aspect is on the path to greater economic and social impacts.
- Given Aspect is still at a relatively early stage in terms of numbers and maturity of spin outs, this is an excellent moment in time to take action to enhance the way impact data is collected (and spin outs are properly supported to do this).
- Aspect should put in place stronger mechanisms immediately to address how and what data is captured and ensure it can showcase its full impact as the volume of successful commercialisation projects continues to grow.
- Aspect has a powerful Theory of Change model. However if the ultimate aim is to promote the creation of fully-fledged independent spin out ventures, Aspect should be prepared to tailor its approach so as to promote that specific outcome.
- Aspect could do more to categorise the types of commercial projects coming through its incubation programme. Targeted support would allow barriers to progression to be addressed earlier and help ensure the most likely-to-succeed projects make it to 'go live'; and once live, additional targeted support in those first 1-2 years will help ensure those spin outs thrive and scale up their impact.

Impact headlines

Outcomes for Innovators:

- 577 research academics from SHAPE disciplines were supported to develop their innovative ideas and develop new commercial skills through attending training and support events.
- Research academics benefited from over 3,250 separate occasions of support and advice in groups and 121 dialogue.
- 100% of academic-innovators reported increased confidence as they progressed through the early stages of support and gave satisfaction ratings of 95% for skills and knowledge gained.

Outcomes for HEIs:

- Pipelines of new SHAPE innovations grew by an average of 35% across HEIs in 2022.
- HEIs leveraged an additional £5.58m of funding in 2022 through Aspect-related activity.
- HEIs saw 25 interdisciplinary collaborations come about within HEIs because of Aspect activity, over 12 times more than targeted for the year. One of the greatest unexpected successes for Aspect is that because of the way it was structured, it hugely reduced the barriers for HEIs to collaborate with each other on new initiatives in a risk-free way. This is a key output. Though not the focus of this report, such a framework could and should be replicated elsewhere.
- At least 70% of HEIs reported that they were satisfied with the benefits derived from being Aspect Members.

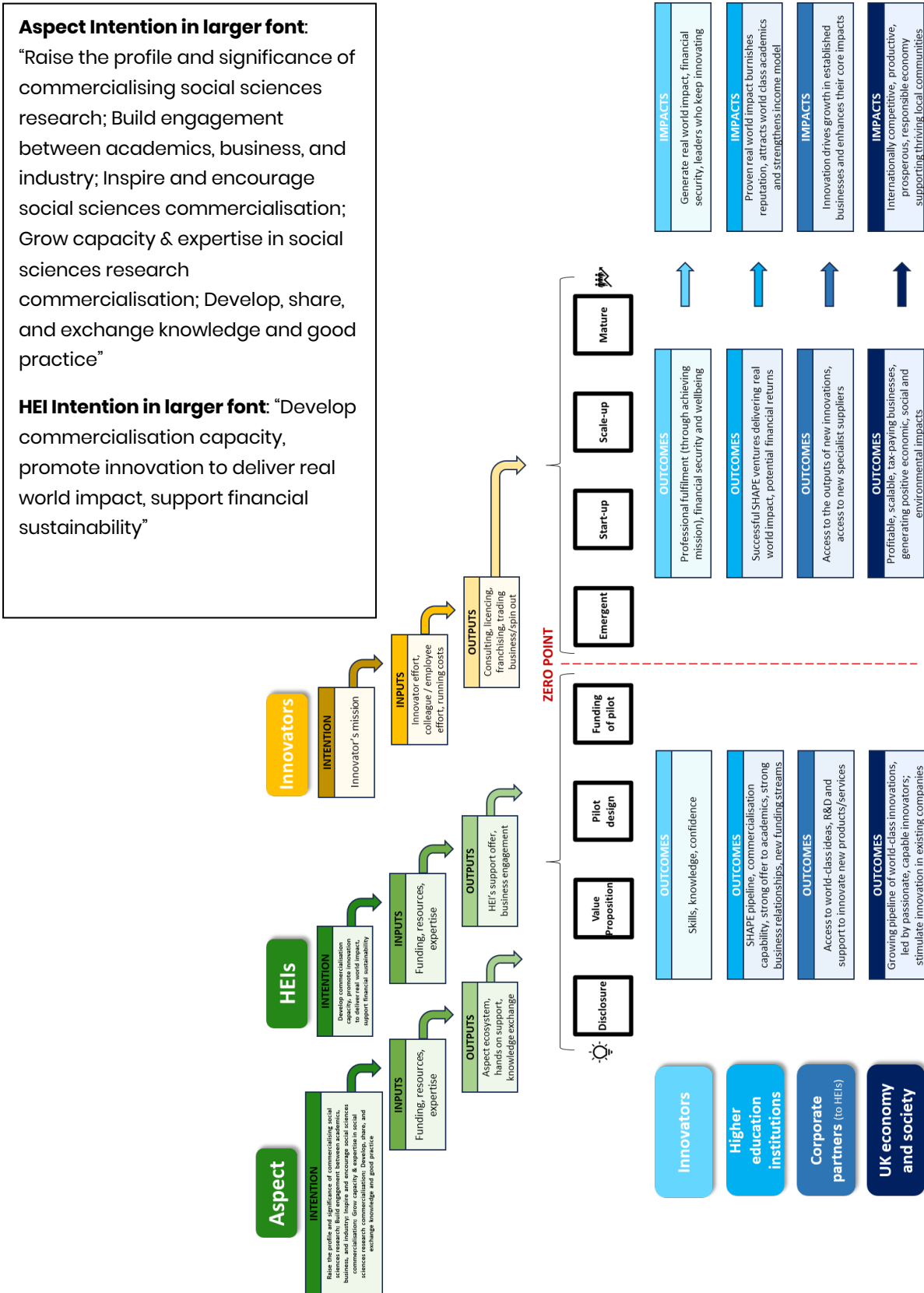
Outcomes for corporate partners:

- Aspect activity has brought about 25 new innovation collaborations with corporate partners in 2022.

Outcomes for UK economy and society:

- The number of HEIs benefiting from the Aspect programme has grown from 25 in 2021 to 43 in 2023.
- Supported by Aspect, there are 523 SHAPE innovations currently progressing through HEI pipelines across the UK.
- Almost half (43%) of those SHAPE commercial projects in development have already declared an explicit social purpose.

Annex A: Aspect theory of change model



About the authors

Divine Ox

Divine Ox has a mission to enable the world's micro, small and medium-sized businesses to measure and manage their social and environmental impact and become visible at scale. Smaller businesses make up 65% of GDP but their impact remains largely invisible and we're currently unable to benchmark, measure and record the collective contribution they make. Today we work with larger organisations to help them better understand and support smaller organisations to overcome barriers impact management and reporting. Divine Ox is an ESG impact knowledge venture supported by Oxford University Innovation.

Campbell McDonald

Campbell is co-founder-director of Divine Ox. Campbell specialises in impact management, organisational governance and design and equitable ownership models. He is Chief Executive of the independent charitable think tank Ownership at Work which explores the impact of sharing ownership and participation with employees. Campbell sits on the Steering Group of the National Social Value Taskforce, on the Cabinet Office's Small Business Panel with a focus on social value and is an External Associate of the Centre for Sustainable Business Practice at the University of Northampton. Campbell is former-MD/founder of social advisory firm Baxendale, ranked a Best in the World B Corp since 2017.

Mark Mann

Mark is co-founder-director of Divine Ox. Mark specialises in providing strategic innovation services across Europe. His services include training, innovation policy development, strategic planning and implementation and impact management with a focus on applied projects, particularly in social innovation and arts, humanities and social sciences commercialisation. He gained extensive experience as the lead for social venture creation and Humanities and Social Sciences Commercialisation at the University of Oxford's Technology Transfer Office (TTO), Oxford University Innovation Ltd (OUI) and at the BBC before that.



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 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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Aspect is funded by Research England's Connecting Capability Fund