

SHAPE CEOs of the Aspect Network (SCAN)

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Executive Summary

The SHAPE CEOs of the Aspect Network (SCAN) project was funded by the Aspect Testbed to better understand executive leadership capacity within SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities and the Arts for People and the Economy) spinout ventures. Led by Cardiff University, the project responded to a recognised gap in the availability, visibility, and coordination of experienced leaders able to support SHAPE-based commercialisation activity.

Drawing on survey responses from 37 leaders with experience of SHAPE ventures, the project explored leadership profiles, motivations, challenges, and rewards associated with leading SHAPE spinout companies. Findings demonstrate strong appetite among experienced leaders to engage in commercial and mentoring opportunities, alongside distinct structural and cultural challenges affecting SHAPE venture development. The report concludes with implications for funders, universities, and innovation stakeholders seeking to strengthen SHAPE entrepreneurial ecosystems.

1. Background and Rationale

SHAPE research increasingly contributes to innovation addressing societal, cultural, and economic challenges. However, spinout companies emerging from SHAPE disciplines often face barriers not typically encountered by STEM-based ventures, particularly in relation to leadership recruitment, investment narratives, and commercial support structures.

Aspect commissioned the SCAN project to:

- Map the leadership landscape for SHAPE spinouts
- Identify skills, motivations, and barriers affecting SHAPE venture leadership
- Explore how leadership capacity might be strengthened across the Aspect Network

2. Methodology

The project utilised an online survey distributed across the Aspect Network and partner networks. A total of 37 respondents participated, representing a modest but experienced cohort of SHAPE venture leaders and supporters. Responses included quantitative indicators and qualitative reflections on leadership experience, challenges, and rewards.

3. Profile of SHAPE Venture Leaders

3.1 Leadership Experience

- **85%** of respondents had been involved in at least one SHAPE venture
- **48%** had held a CEO or Managing Director role in at least one venture
- Several respondents had led multiple ventures

3.2 Disciplinary Backgrounds

Respondents represented a diverse mix of SHAPE and STEM backgrounds, including:

- Education and early childhood development
- Psychology and public policy
- Arts and cultural management
- Business, consultancy, and professional services

This diversity reflects the interdisciplinary nature of SHAPE ventures and challenges assumptions that leadership must be discipline-specific.

4. Appetite for Engagement

One of SCAN's core objectives was to assess interest in future leadership and mentoring opportunities.

- **77%** of respondents expressed interest in commercial opportunities arising from SHAPE ventures
- **74%** expressed interest in mentoring emerging SHAPE CEOs

These findings indicate a latent leadership resource within the SHAPE ecosystem that could be better mobilised through targeted matchmaking, incentives, and support mechanisms.

5. The Role of the “SHAPE” Label

Respondents were asked whether defining a spinout as a “SHAPE venture” helped, hindered, or made no difference.

5.1 SHAPE as Helpful (48%)

Respondents identified several benefits:

- Signals research-driven and ethically grounded value within universities
- Supports cross-disciplinary alignment and strategy
- Provides access to SHAPE-specific networks, expertise, and credibility

5.2 SHAPE as a Hindrance (19%)

Concerns included:

- Confusion among commercial audiences unfamiliar with the term
- Risk of distracting from the core value proposition
- Perception of limited scalability or investability

5.3 SHAPE as Neutral (33%)

Neutral responses emphasised:

- Market and customer focus over disciplinary identity
- Limited relevance of academic framing outside HE contexts
- Similar operating models to many early-stage service-based ventures

Overall, findings suggest that the usefulness of the SHAPE label is context-dependent and should be deployed strategically rather than uniformly.

6. Challenges Facing SHAPE Ventures

Respondents identified a range of interconnected challenges:

6.1 Investment and Funding

- Limited alignment with traditional venture capital models
- Fewer grant opportunities compared with STEM
- Cash-flow pressures linked to long public-sector procurement cycles

6.2 Commercial Definition and Market Fit

- Difficulty defining and pricing research-based services
- Challenges articulating value propositions without trading history
- Risk of mis-categorisation when offerings span multiple domains

6.3 Academic–Business Interface

- Time constraints on academic founders
- Complex IP, licensing, and institutional processes
- Cultural tensions around commercialisation within academia

7. Balancing Impact and Profit

Many SHAPE ventures operate with mission-driven or not-for-profit models, creating tension between social purpose and financial sustainability.

Key approaches identified include:

- Establishing clear mission, vision, values, and organisational culture
- Adopting double or triple bottom-line frameworks with measurable objectives
- Strong governance and accountability structures
- Business models that align commercial success with social impact
- Sustainable and evidence-based pricing strategies
- Transparent communication with stakeholders and investors

Respondents highlighted the need for adaptability and integrity as ventures evolve.

8. Rewards of Leading a SHAPE Venture

Despite challenges, respondents consistently described leadership of SHAPE ventures as deeply rewarding.

Key themes included:

8.1 Impact and Purpose

- Seeing research translated into real-world change
- Tangible benefits for communities and society
- Alignment with personal and organisational values

8.2 Professional Growth

- Development of new skills bridging research and practice
- Expanded professional networks
- Enhanced leadership identity

8.3 Creativity and Innovation

- Freedom to develop novel products, services, and business models
- Enjoyment and intellectual stimulation compared with traditional ventures

8.4 Economic and Social Value

- Job creation and economic contribution
- Building social capital through collaboration and trust
- Achieving sustainable impact through financially viable models

9. Implications for Aspect and the SHAPE Ecosystem

Findings point to clear opportunities for strengthening SHAPE commercialisation:

- Better visibility and coordination of experienced SHAPE leaders
- Structured mentoring and governance pathways
- Funders and universities aligning support with SHAPE-specific models
- Strategic use of SHAPE framing depending on audience and market

The SCAN database represents an initial step toward addressing leadership gaps, but sustained investment and facilitation will be required.

10. Conclusions and Next Steps

The SCAN project demonstrates that leadership capacity exists within the SHAPE ecosystem but remains underutilised. By addressing structural barriers, aligning incentives, and supporting leadership development, there is an opportunity to accelerate the growth and impact of SHAPE ventures.

Future work should focus on sustaining the SCAN network, embedding leadership matchmaking within commercialisation pipelines, and continuing to evidence the value of SHAPE-led innovation.

Aspect Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts Network