

Landscape of Higher Education Institutions' Readiness and Social Scientists' Appetite in the Commercialisation of Research out of Social Sciences (CROSS)

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Cite as: Abdul Rahman, S. & Vorley, T. 2023 *Landscape of Higher Education Institutions' Readiness and Social Scientists' Appetite in the Commercialisation of Research Out of Social Sciences (CROSS)*. Oxford, UK: Innovation Caucus.

I. Project Summary

The current project conducted by Innovation Caucus researchers aims to extend insights in supporting commercialisation of research out of social sciences (CROSS) by exploring the landscape of CROSS among social scientists and higher education institutions (HEIs). It focuses on finding nuanced insights on three key themes: 1) the appetite of social scientists across different disciplines in approaching CROSS, 2) the current HEIs' institutional readiness in enabling and supporting CROSS, and 3) the funding pathways which have enabled social scientists to approach CROSS. The insights could provide the ESRC with an understanding of how to better align their funding calls with the interests of social scientists and provide greater support in the successful development of CROSS in the UK.

2. Methodology

Two methods were adopted for the data collection:

- 1) **Survey** - Disseminated among social scientists across multiple HEIs. **Social scientists across multiple disciplines** responded to the survey, giving a good breadth of representation of social science (Figure 1). It scoped their appetite in approaching CROSS, the funding pathways which may have enabled successful CROSS, and potential funding pathways that might attract social scientists to CROSS;
- 2) **Interviews** - Conducted with **13 experts in CROSS** (knowledge exchange (KE) professionals and social scientists who have successfully commercialised their research; Table 1) to observe the same themes in a more in-depth manner and get a better understanding of how HEIs can enable CROSS through various support mechanisms.

Data collection took place between September 2022 to December 2022.

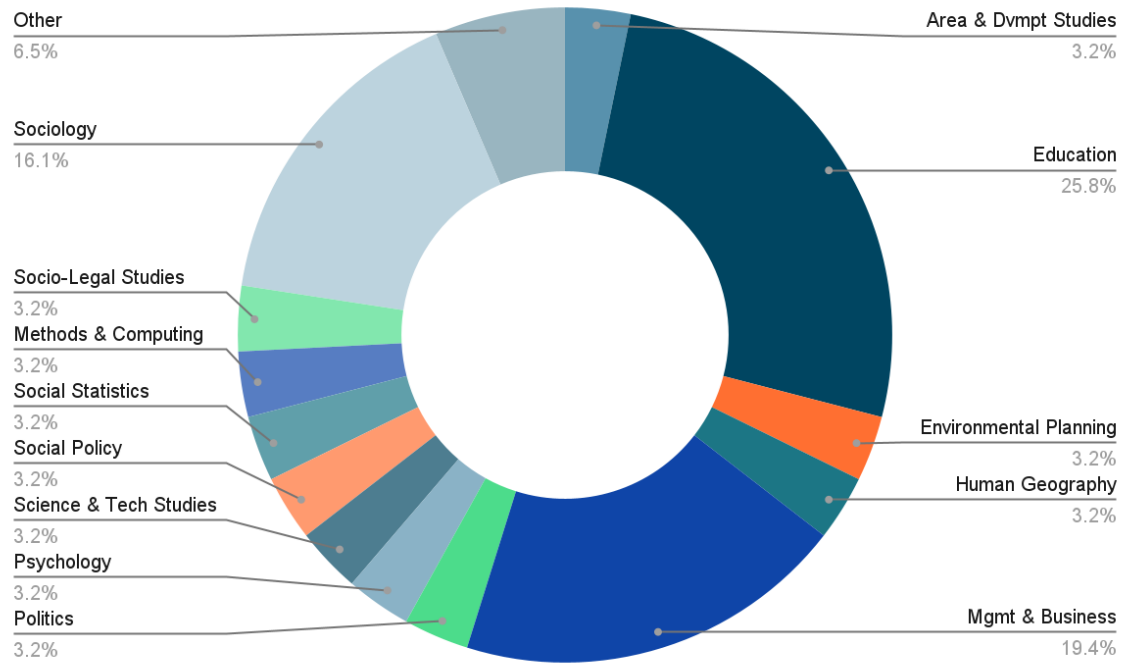


Figure 1: Social Science Respondents Based on Discipline

No	Role	Type of Institution	Descriptor
1	Research Impact Lead	Start-up Incubator	KE 1
2	Project Lead	Start-up Incubator	KE 2
3	Senior KE Professional	Research-intensive HEI	KE 3
4	KE Professional	Research-intensive HEI	KE 4
5	Senior KE Professional	Research-intensive HEI	KE 5
6	Senior KE Professional	Research-intensive HEI	KE 6
7	Technology Transfer Manager	Research-intensive HEI	KE 7
8	IP Manager	Research-intensive HEI	KE 8
9	Knowledge translation Manager	Research-intensive HEI	KE 9
10	Senior KE Professional	Teaching-intensive HEI	KE 10
11	Impact Manager	Research-intensive HEI	KE 11
12	CEO	Start-Up	Entrepreneur 1
13	Academic	Research-focussed HEI	Entrepreneur 2

Table 1: List of Interviewees based on Institutions

3. Findings

3.1 Appetite of Social Scientists for Approaching CROSS Across Disciplines

60.0% of respondents of the survey have not commercialised their research. The reasons behind this are: they do not know the value of research commercialisation (10.5%), they do not know how to commercialise (21.0%), and they are not sure if their research is suitable for commercialisation (26.3%), or believe that the internal HEI funding mechanism is

insufficient for enabling commercialisation (10.5%). Comments provide more depth to the findings:

“I would not know which elements of my research could be commercially valuable. There is no particular concept that strikes me as something that could be packaged and commercialised.”

“Under the terms of the data sharing agreements I have, commercialisation would not be allowed.”

“I wouldn't know where to start, and I know that I would need hands-on support from someone who knows what they are talking about (rather than just invitations to a workshop or training session).”

“I think it would be important to receive some guidance about how to commercialise one's research. I am particularly interested in consultancy, but I am not sure how that could be done or set up, so the prospect is too daunting to effectively act on it.”

Research commercialisation has come strongly from business and management, education, and social policy, as confirmed by interviews, but other disciplines are also increasing their uptake in engaging with CROSS. The need for education and the challenge of training and time (among the different academic activities that they currently have) continues to remain a major challenge in attracting social scientists to pursue CROSS activities.

3.2 Funding Pathways that have Enabled Social Scientists to Approach CROSS Successfully

40.0% of respondents of the survey have commercialised their research, **with 6.7% using the start-up/social enterprise route** and others through remunerated activities such as consultancies, training, seminars, among others. **Only 1 out of the survey respondents who have commercialised** said that the commercialisation route did not work for them. The funding routes that have been used by respondents who have commercialised include internal university funding (41.7%), awards from private organisations (16.7%), IAAs (16.7%), Network Plus (8.3%), and Catalyst Award (8.3%). Respondents expressed interest in following other funding routes such as iCure, Aspect, IAAs, and Social Enterprise UK funding.

Reasons behind the perception of success in CROSS varied. One respondent mentioned the turnover of their start-up as a benchmark for success. Others spoke about the chance of exploring the value of research external to academia:

“I used my knowledge in practice. I could generate income and practitioners reached out to me for my expertise.”

“[Commercialisation] facilitates impact with governmental agencies while also bringing in revenue to the university.”

Respondents who have not commercialised through start-ups and licensing expressed the desire to do so. The reason behind this is to generate more income and have more control over the impact of their research.

3.3 Funding Pathways That Might Attract Social Scientists to CROSS

Social scientists prefer to receive funding in the form of traditional grants rather than prizes. The factors that influence their decision to apply for CROSS funding remain in non-financial

support, or “hands-on support” that a CROSS funding could provide them. Others also describe the credibility of funding provider(s) to the academic community (20.0%), credibility of funding provider(s) to the industry (10.0%), and credibility of funding provider(s) to the external finance community (3.3%) as important factors of being attracted to a CROSS funding call.

“Mission-led” funding generated the most interest in attracting social scientists to CROSS. One respondent who has successfully commercialised mentioned that their start-up is specifically “mission-led” and had been integral in their approach for commercialisation.

The survey provided different “missions” to gauge the interest of social scientists. The missions are ranked based on frequency of response:¹

- 1) Health, Wellbeing and Social Care (20.0%)
- 2) Public Services/ Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (13.3% each)
- 3) Population and Society; Politics; Future of Work; Data and Analysis for Decision Making; Understanding the Impact of COVID-19; Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (6.7% each)
- 4) Poverty Reduction; Gender Egalitarianism (3.3%)

Similar responses were captured for a “mission-led” multidisciplinary funding call for CROSS purposes.

3.4 HEIs’ Institutional Readiness in Enabling and Supporting CROSS

Interviews with CROSS experts provide unique insights into HEIs’ institutional readiness for enabling and supporting CROSS. These findings are summarised:

- HEIs that have a vision for championing commercialisation of research or research impact tend to provide better support in enabling CROSS. As Entrepreneur 2 mentioned, their HEI has a strategic priority of “Social Responsibility,” through which, any impact activities (such as commercialisation) that meet this vision will be supported by leadership groups.
- Experts who are part of IAAs mentioned that the flexibility of IAAs’ funding is helpful in enabling CROSS activities in their institutions. As CROSS is a new area, experts must experiment with a variety of ways to educate, attract, and train social scientists in engaging CROSS.
- A neglected support system for CROSS activities remains in the area of academic workload plans (i.e., the division of their work hours based on their salary and academic activity). Experts explain that current funding does not always allow for the buy-out of academics’ time in their workload plans, which limits the attention that academics can seriously give to CROSS activities. This can be disruptive to successful commercialisation as timeliness is much needed for any type of commercialisation activity.
- An ideal CROSS programme is when support for commercialisation can truly reflect the needs of individual academics; for example, by reflecting on their risk appetite,

¹ It should be noted that the percentages may not add up to 100.0% as respondents were allowed to pick more than 1 answer.

their commercialisation objectives, and their personal drives, among others. Institutions that are more mature with CROSS activities have multiple routes to commercialisation: partnerships, licensing, venture building, or even repackaging research into professional development and training products. However, this is not something that all HEIs have the capacity to do. Currently, support for CROSS specifically, for example, through availability of staff dedicated in this area, is rare in HEIs. Developing more independent incubators such as Zinc can enable CROSS activities at a national level.

- There is value in looking beyond the individual academic and more broadly into the research area itself and its value to commercialisation. Individual HEIs may not have the capacity to enable and support CROSS. However, a consortia of HEIs for a particular mission-led commercialisation programme might be beneficial for this purpose.

4. Opportunities

1. **Rethinking the purpose and metrics of CROSS** - Multi-stakeholder consultation is needed in rethinking the purposes of CROSS. Consideration needs to be given to whether commercialisation should be seen as an outcome or an output. Current metrics for CROSS are limited to the spaces of venture building, licensing, and patenting. Regardless, social science research could be invaluable in pre-commercialisation activities that may be integral in enabling commercialisation of activities in other disciplines. A toolkit or pathway map could be developed to show where social scientists might identify their value in commercialisation.
2. **Developing multidisciplinary/consortia, mission-led CROSS funding** - Current challenges remain in a lack of capacity to support CROSS at the department of social science level and/or HEI level. Having mission-led CROSS funding calls that prioritise multidisciplinary teams and/or consortia of universities could be invaluable in efficiently expanding capacity for successful CROSS activities.
3. **Developing smaller funding calls for education and training on CROSS** - Additional funding streams could be created for the purposes of educational awareness, such as in developing workshops, masterclasses, or promotional activities to spread the value of CROSS among social scientists and (departmental or central HEI) leadership teams to get their buy-in in supporting CROSS.
4. **Enabling buy-out of social scientists' time in current CROSS funding** - CROSS funding needs to support the time bought from social scientists' workload plans to meaningfully engage with CROSS, and provide access to further non-financial support such as access to start-up incubators and networks of successful entrepreneurs.

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Research note

This research forms part of the wider work conducted by Innovation Caucus in partnership with Innovate UK (IUK) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). If you have any questions in regard to this report please contact info@innovationcaucus.

Acknowledgements

This research was commissioned by ESRC. We are very grateful to the project sponsors at ESRC for their input into this research. The interpretations and opinions within this report are those of the authors and may not reflect the policy positions of ESRC.

About the Innovation Caucus

The Innovation Caucus supports sustainable innovation-led growth by promoting engagement between the social sciences and the innovation ecosystem. Our members are leading academics from across the social science community, who are engaged in different aspects of innovation research. We connect the social sciences, IUK and ESRC, by providing research insights to inform policy and practice. Professor Tim Vorley is the Academic Lead.

The initiative is funded and co-developed by the ESRC and IUK, part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). The support of the funders is acknowledged. The views expressed in this piece are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the funders.