

To build a better world after COVID-19, now is the time to transform how we think about social science commercialisation

*As the world emerges from the COVID-19 lockdown many opportunities have arisen to rethink how and for whom our societies operate. In this post, **Julia Black** argues that social sciences can play a unique role in the post-COVID-19 recovery by forging new relationships with business and commerce and outlines how initiatives, such as the Aspect network, are seeking to bridge the divide between the social sciences and business.*

The social sciences make an enormous contribution to the economy. A [2012 study by Cambridge Econometrics](#) for LSE showed that the economic benefits of social sciences research at that time could be estimated at roughly £19.4bn a year.

However, the benefits of social sciences are limited by barriers in the research commercialisation process. To illustrate this point, in 2016 a [review for the ESRC](#) recognised that the social sciences and social scientists themselves more commonly focus on non-commercial users of research in policy and civil society, rather than on the private sector.

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Given this, how can the commercial impact of the social sciences be maximised and its already significant impact be more readily recognised – and, more fundamentally, why is a focus on this area now more important than ever?

Social sciences are crucial to shaping our post Covid-19 world

The social sciences have a critical role to play in contributing to the ability of the UK and the rest of the world to ‘build back better’ in the wake of Covid-19. From the work of Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum, Partha Dasgupta and others, we know that focusing on economic growth is a necessary, but not sufficient part of what that reconstruction has to entail. To deliver prosperity that benefits all society, we need to focus on four key ‘capitals’. Those are our economic capital, for sure, but also our human capital – people’s education and skills, as well as their mental health and wellbeing; our social capital – the strength and resilience of our social, cultural and governance institutions; and our natural capital – including the drive to net zero and the biodiversity of our planet.

Too often the solution for addressing these issues has been thought to lie in public policy measures alone. As important as these might be, the social sciences must seize the opportunities to effect market solutions directly through private commerce, whether through for-profit or social enterprises. Governments, businesses, civil societies and others can all benefit from insights of the social sciences in developing and delivering strategies which can contribute to the attainment of goals across this broader ‘prosperity scorecard’.

Commercialising social sciences faces significant challenges

Arguably the insights of social sciences are already being extremely well commercialised, in that they power key areas of our service-based economy. But the barriers to universities commercialising social sciences research themselves and of linking academic expertise with businesses are significant.

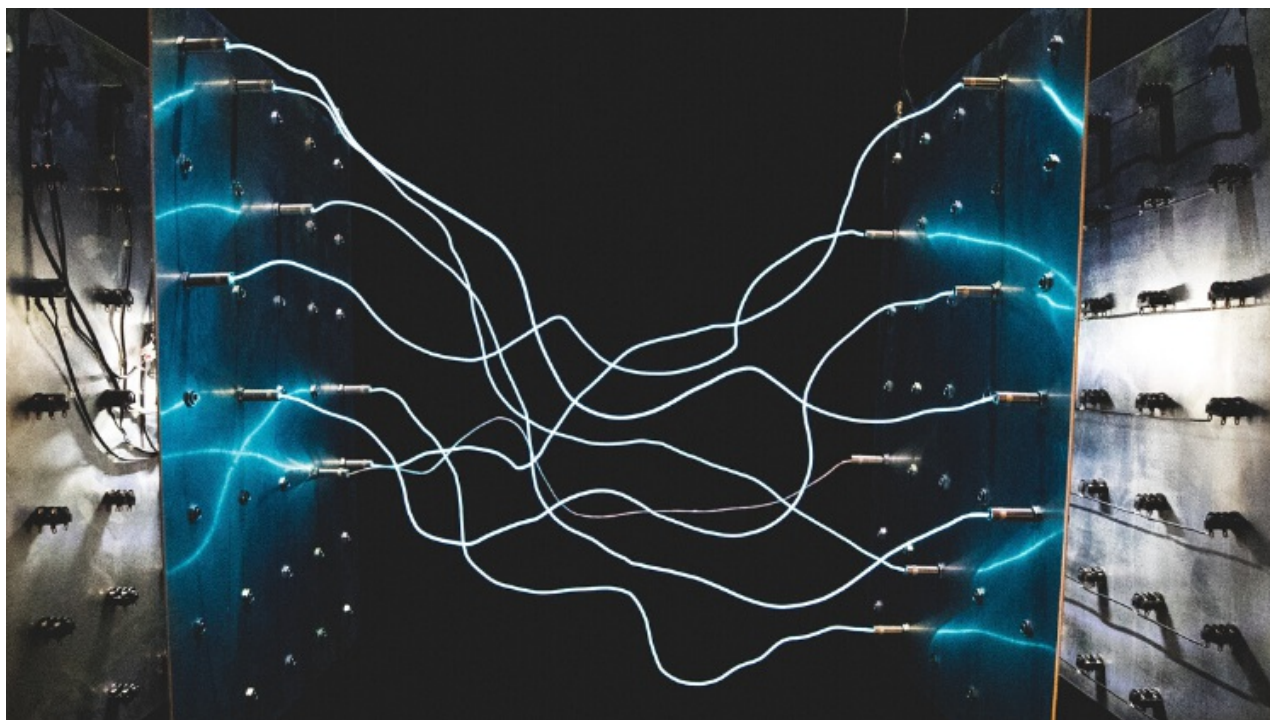
A [report by the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences \(CHASS\)](#) (2005) identified six interconnected challenges for the commercialisation process specific to these disciplines:

- (i) the value of social sciences research is not understood by industry;
- (ii) there is a lack of standard practices for working with industry;
- (iii) there is a lack of ‘business skills’ among social sciences researchers;

(iv) institutions are not equipped to accommodate social sciences research commercialisation;

(v) incentives to undertake commercial work are lacking; and

(vi) industry is unaware of the possibilities and limitations of social sciences research, and industrial R&D spend on social sciences is minimal compared to industrial R&D spend on science.



We could add to that two more structural problems. The first is that much of the benefit of social sciences research to business lies in the knowhow of the researchers, which may not be protected by intellectual property laws. Copyright offers protection only to the actual printed words; the ideas and knowledge they communicate are not protectable and so can be used freely by anyone. In contrast, much of STEM research knowledge can be protected by patents, which can be licensed or sold. The second is that current UK definitions of R&D do not capture large areas where social science research is relevant, for example data collection and analysis. It is clear that social sciences commercialisation requires a completely new, transformative approach. But, what does this look like?

Developing a new route to impact

The [McMillan report](#) (2016) recognised that 'Universities need to pursue the most appropriate route to impact for the particular research/technology'.

To my mind, achieving this requires a multi-pronged strategy, but two distinct, yet closely related, pillars of activity are worth highlighting:

- Developing a collaborative approach to transforming how social sciences research is commercialised
- Giving the social sciences a new voice and narrative – a brand refresh if you like – that enables it to communicate its vital story in a more coherent and impactful way

LSE is involved in driving forward two critical initiatives that seek to fulfil both pillars.

The first is [Aspect](#) (a Research England funded Connecting Capability programme), a network of organisations working together to support innovation, entrepreneurship and research commercialisation in social sciences – currently comprising 11 leading UK institutions, and growing. Aspect is seeking to galvanise a solutions-focused approach that cuts across the divides of academic/commercial, research/applied and complementary specialisms.

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Within this, we are developing a range of approaches suitable to the nature of the social and commercial challenge, and the form of the intellectual property involved – creating an ecosystem (an innovation community) of people (researchers, research users and entrepreneurs), process (optimising the commercialisation pipeline) and investment to bring into being completely new forms of social sciences commercialisation. The programme is focused on creating products and new businesses, not solely on the commercialisation of specific intellectual property rights. Critically, the Aspect programme has been designed to address each of the CHASS challenges highlighted above.

The second is a separate, but related, initiative to provide a new voice and narrative for social sciences, humanities and the arts. [SHAPE](#) is the collective initiative of the LSE, British Academy, Academy of Social Sciences, the Arts Council England, and we hope in the future many others. An aim of this initiative is that these disciplines become known as the 'SHAPE' subjects – 'Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts for People and the Economy'. There are unprecedented opportunities to mobilise SHAPE disciplines to create a path for change which can make the world a better place for all of us. They are the lens through which we make sense of the world. They help us understand ourselves and one another, master data, articulate information and influence change – whether it's in the fight against COVID-19, tackling inequalities, helping us live healthier and more purposeful lives, or protecting the environment.

Green shoots are emerging, but there's still much to do

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While we are seeing some advances being made with regards to raising the profile of and support for social sciences commercialisation – through the initiatives outlined above – we have a long way to go. However, the foundations are now in place and it is up to us to navigate a new relationship between the social sciences and the world of business as well as government and civil society, and to work together to define and create a better future.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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