

Businesses know the value of social sciences. Higher Education policy needs to catch up

*The social sciences are recognised for their role in evaluating policy and offering practice-based interventions about 'what works'. However, they are less often justified in terms of their value to the private sector. **Sharon Witherspoon** outlines the finding of a report into eight case studies of UK businesses. The report covers a range of different sectors and finds that social scientists are in demand by businesses for what they know and the way that they approach knowledge and facts. Recommendations are offered for how higher education policy can better capitalise on this.*

This blog is based on a report, [Vital Business: the Essential Role of Social Sciences in the UK Private Sector](#) carried out by the [Campaign for Social Science](#), in partnership with [SAGE Publishing](#).

This post is the second in a series exploring the role of SHAPE subjects in the post-pandemic landscape

SHAPE: Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts for People and the Economy

Why the social sciences?

Most of us are used to seeing evidence about, and justifications for, social science research in choosing, making and evaluating social and economic policy, and for practice-based interventions about '[what works](#)' (and what doesn't). Social science has a long history of policy engagement, and one that has been given renewed visibility in the context of COVID-19, both in the [UK](#) and [internationally](#).

But we are on the back foot if we do not also understand and – on the basis of robust evidence – make the case that the social sciences are important to private sector businesses too. It is vital that academics and policy-makers alike understand this.



Of course, many of us already knew that evidence about graduate destinations shows that the average post-graduation salaries of social science graduates are very similar to those of [STEM](#) graduates, with much variation by disciplines within both areas. A previous Campaign for Social Science report, [Positive Prospects](#), went through the evidence in some detail, and was backed up by longer-term [analysis](#) by the Institute of Fiscal Studies.

Vital Business Report

In *Vital Business*, we looked at the issue in a different way. This report is based on eight case studies of UK businesses. It covers a range of different sectors, including businesses that are often thought of as science-based. The findings challenge some of the common myths about the usefulness of social science knowledge and skills in employment.

We conducted intensive interviews in each of the companies. We aimed to get a detailed account of the many ways that social science knowledge and skills (and employees who were graduates with social science degrees) were deployed.

The report shows that social sciences are both widely-used and valued by businesses: in leadership roles; in running the business day-to-day (including finance, HR and so on); to understand consumers and markets and regulations; in strategic planning and risk analysis; and even in R&D, including often working jointly with STEM scientists.

The content of what these employees know matters to their employers.

For instance, an interviewee from Cisco, a large multinational specialising in digital technologies, told us:

‘There is a huge benefit to having people with social science skills. We have to think about the implications that our technology will have and explain them ... – from realising the benefits through to managing the challenges.... This requires input from an array of social scientists specialising in business, communications, economics, HR, law, marketing, operations and politics to make our technology compelling.... To be successful, technology needs social science input.’

And Ashley Parry Jones, Director of Planning at global engineering consultancy WSP, said:

‘As an engineering consultancy, WSP has many projects that will be more engineering-led, but social scientists play an essential role ...[to] ensure solutions are applicable in a real-world situation. They provide a different voice and a different way of thinking. Engineers work to establish technical standards. Whereas social scientists are optimizers – it’s not about perfection, but about an optimal decision that satisfies multiple parameters at once. That is a very different type of conversation, and I think that is a really useful challenge that social scientists provide.’

Whether the business was a services-based company (like Ipsos MORI or business services firm Deloitte or reinsurance brokerage Willis Towers Watson) or a manufacturer (like Diageo) or an energy company (like Shell), some common lessons stood out.

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In looking to the future – and most of these we spoke to took a long view, even as COVID-19 raged around them – almost all of them predicted more and deeper cross-disciplinary working. This was true even in science-based businesses.

But what some may find more surprising is that though their general ability to analyse evidence, or their wider ‘softer’ skills (curiosity, ability to communicate) were valued, the *substantive knowledge and methodological* skills of social science graduates were too. Political science graduates and geographers were, for example, often mentioned as particularly important to analysing risks, including geopolitical risk, and in strategic planning. Graduates from economics, demography, geography, psychology, and sociology were often mentioned in relation to understanding marketing, behaviour in different circumstances, the impact of regulatory regimes, and so on. The content of what these employees know matters to their employers.

Implications of the findings

1.Social sciences and HE policy

First, higher education policy should recognise that for businesses to succeed they need employees with diverse skills and disciplinary backgrounds. We encourage policy makers not to take an over-simple view that *only* STEM subjects matter to business success. What matters to business is having the right skills across the range of their work. It is not ‘either/ or’ but ‘both/ and’. It will be worth bearing this in mind when the government responds to the [Augar Review](#).

2.Social sciences and data skills

Second, the evidence suggests that number and data skills among social science graduates are particularly valued. This is partly because it helps them communicate better with colleagues and is increasingly part of business management. But a particular contribution of social scientists with number and data skills was that they could not only use data, but that they could question data intelligently (What were the sources? How reliable is it? How can we piece together the most accurate possible picture from partial evidence? How can we explain the findings to others?) Number and data skills are useful across all social science disciplines.

3.Branding the social sciences

Finally, we believe that UK social science has a ‘brand’ problem. It was striking that in many cases our approaches to the companies started with their questions about what the social sciences *are*. We had to start by explaining the wide range of disciplines it covers (business-related subjects, law, economics, demography, geography, political science, psychology, sociology and others). So while this work is part of the [SHAPE](#) initiative, most of our interviewees knew what ‘STEM’ and the arts and humanities are. They did not have the same understanding about the social sciences, as page ix of [Vital Business](#) explains.

That is a challenge the Campaign will hope to address over the coming months. We believe businesspeople, MPs, and others should feel proud to say that they are a social scientist using their knowledge and skills in their work. This research shows they would be in good company in doing so.

The UK's Campaign for Social Science is the outward, campaigning arm of the UK's [Academy of Social Sciences](#). The Academy is composed of about 1330 individual Fellows, 46 member Learned Societies and other affiliates. It includes practitioners, as well as academics. Its aims are to promote appreciation of the importance of the social sciences for public benefit, and to consider issues that affect their long-term well-being.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, 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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