

Overview

The knowledge, skills and ways of thinking that a social science degree confers open up a huge range of career opportunities. Social scientists work across all industries and sectors, deploying a range of skills to the benefit of society. Some social science professions, including law, accountancy and planning, are closely linked to particular subjects and require specialist qualifications. Many other roles relate directly to the knowledge and skills specific to a subject, for example, geospatial analysts trained in geography, operations managers trained in business and management, political scientists working for polling companies, and psychologists working on organisation behaviours. Other jobs and careers are open to all social scientists, making use of the transferable skills gained by studying a social science degree.

UK social science graduates have good employment prospects. They are valued not only for their discipline-specific knowledge, but also for their critical analysis and writing skills, problem-solving skills, ability to see the 'big picture', and for their people-skills, which are especially important in many of the professional and management jobs for which they are hired. After their undergraduate degrees, they go on to work in a wide range of sectors and occupations, with employment rates and earnings similar to graduates in STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths).

“Social scientists are experts in human behaviour, often an insight that data scientists, engineers and programmers lack... AI, blockchain and automation are just some of the developments that will alter our daily lives. But no matter how ground-breaking or advanced a technology is, it will flop if the public doesn't like it.”¹

Key facts

- 47% of UK students graduate from university with a social science degree.²
- According to the latest LEO data, 86% of UK-domiciled first degree graduates in the social sciences were employed five years after graduation, compared to 88% for STEM and 85% for arts and humanities.³
- Five social science disciplines are among the top ten disciplines for lifetime graduate earnings: economics, law, politics, business studies and geography.⁴
- 60% of global leaders have undergraduate degrees in social science fields, including 61% of politicians.⁵

Case studies from our *Vital Business* report⁶

We examined how UK private sector businesses use social science knowledge and skills (and employ social science graduates) to run and grow their firms. Respondents to the study said:

¹ Emmons, J. (2018) [“Why hiring social scientists is the next big thing”](#), Guild Digital Ltd. (accessed 15 May 2023).

² Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023) [What do HE students study?](#), Cheltenham: HESA.

³ Department for Education (2023) [LEO Graduate outcomes provider level data \(tax year 2019/20\)](#), UK Government website (accessed 7 June 2023).

⁴ Britton, J., Dearden, L., der Erve, L. & Waltmann, B. (2020) [The impact of undergraduate degrees on lifetime earnings](#), London: Institute for Fiscal Studies: pp40-41.

⁵ Lenihan, A. & Witherspoon, S. (2018) [Positive Prospects: careers for social science graduates and why number and data skills matter](#), London: Academy of Social Sciences / Campaign for Social Science.

⁶ Lenihan, A. & Witherspoon, S. (2020) [Vital Business: the essential role of the social sciences in the UK private sector](#), London: Academy of Social Sciences / Campaign for Social Science.

- *“Hiring practices vary across different divisions within **Deloitte**. In general, the people hired are reasonably numerate with strong problem-solving skills, no matter what degree they did at university. But we increasingly value empathy, social skills, and judgement. The ability to form a reasoned opinion, often without complete or well-structured information, as most real-life situations demand – that is key to our jobs.”*
- *“**[Diageo]** need to have expertise in our employee base that draws on all of the disciplines of the social sciences, and to take expert advice and sounding from the outside world to challenge our thinking and help it evolve.”*
- *“As an engineering consultancy, **WSP** has many projects that will be more engineering led, but social scientists play an essential role in providing challenge and 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.”*

Conclusions included:

- In all cases, companies used social science knowledge and skills to run their business day to day. Economics, finance, accounting, management, law and human resources – all involving social science knowledge and skills, and trained social scientist employees – were deployed as part of ordinary management and governance.
- For almost all companies, social science knowledge and skills were especially important for leadership cadres.
- Most companies use social science knowledge and skills from a variety of disciplines to understand and engage with their markets, clients, suppliers and consumers.
- Many companies use social science knowledge and skills to analyse and manage risk and long-term strategies.
- Many companies use social science knowledge and skills to develop new products or new ways of working.

Recommendations

- 1) To help foster a strong and diverse pipeline of social scientists and build capacity in the sector, the Academy of Social Sciences will be building further our own partnerships and work in the years ahead, and celebrating the successes and role models within the social sciences. To support this, we want governments across the UK to facilitate and promote high-quality employability and careers information to the next generation of social sciences and to recognise how social science skills are growing in importance.
- 2) The importance of skills developed as part of social science degrees to a wide range of employers underpins the need to retain broad and balanced curricula at secondary school level and access to high quality, contemporary careers advice for young people.
- 3) Quantitative social science skills continue to be in high demand in our data driven society, and the inclusion of such skills within undergraduate programmes is essential.
- 4) We recommend that universities continue to learn from, and build upon, the Nuffield Foundation and ESRC’s £20m [Q-Step](#) programme which catalysed the growth of quantitative social science in the UK.