

Overview

A new report from the Academy of Social Sciences has emphasised the critical yet under-developed role for the UK's social sciences in the UK's current research, development and innovation system. It further argues that there is untapped potential for the social sciences to do more to tackle the major societal challenges of our time.

The report – “*Reimagining the recipe for research & innovation: the secret sauce of social science.*”¹ sets out some distinctive flavours of the UK's social sciences, and how they are transforming UK research into a recipe that is genuinely world-leading and future-focussed. While the UK scientific talent pool runs deep, so do its strengths in social sciences². However, there are also some weaknesses in the system: in relative terms, the UK under-invests in R&I, particularly from the private sector; public investment remains vulnerable to wider economic pressures; the UK's public R&I system is weighted to London and the southeast of England, and is heavily reliant on universities, with limited regional and institutional diversity.

A striking feature of recent UK Government initiatives and announcements is the visible priority they place on new technologies and STEM-related R&I, and the limited amount that they say about the role and contribution of the social sciences. Our report argues that the UK's research and innovation strategy is now at risk of becoming lopsided, and missing an equivalently rich, textured and ambitious agenda for the many ways social science research and expertise contribute to addressing the UK's economic, social and environmental priorities.

Key findings

The report draws on data which highlights the ways in which social scientists contribute to a diverse ecosystem of talent and impact. The examples we have given demonstrate not only the essential role of the social sciences in the STEM sphere, but also the amplifying effect of collaborative work across the STEM and social science fields. Research that involves a partnership from the outset has a strong impact on scientific citations, emerging technologies, and usefulness to policymakers. This interdisciplinarity brings the strengths of the social sciences to bear: understanding behaviours, human engagement and uptake of new technologies; questioning paradigms, looking for unintended consequences, and providing legal and ethical frameworks and social and historical context.

Such research should be facilitated by policy that rewards projects which cross disciplinary boundaries in partnership. As much has already been acknowledged at a UK level by both the Grant Review³ and recent spending reviews - but this is a trend which needs to be further enabled. It is also an agenda to be more clearly embraced by devolved governments.

Based on the data, our report makes four key points:

- 1) **Social sciences enable whole-systems thinking.** They enable innovators and entrepreneurs to understand system capabilities, vital system contexts and dynamics – including economies,

¹ Wilsdon, J., Weber-Boer, K., Wastl, J. and Bridges, E. (2023) *Reimagining the Recipe for Research and Innovation: the secret sauce of social science*, London: Sage / Academy of Social Sciences.

² See, for example, [last year's report by RAND](#) which examined data from REF 2021 showing the impact of social science research on governments, communities, policymakers and practitioners – in all four domains, impact from social sciences outstripped that of the STEM, arts and humanities sectors.

³ Grant, D. (2022) *UKRI Independent Review: final report and recommendations*, London: Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

productivity, institutions, skills, training and cultures – as well as playing a role in understanding and improving the R&I system itself.

- 2) **Social sciences are critical for good policy development.** Social science plays a disproportionately prominent role in informing policy, and consistently delivers for governments when developing evidence-based policy.
- 3) **Social sciences underpin smart and responsible innovation.** Emerging technologies depend upon social sciences for the legal, regulatory and ethical frameworks that are essential for their efficacy and adoption within a UK context.
- 4) **Social sciences are essential to international collaboration and tackling shared global challenges.** The UK's international R&I strategy is outwardly focused and benefits from being underpinned by social sciences (eg, business and management, politics, geography, international development). The UK's social scientists have a track record of working effectively with partners and providing a substantive focus for UK strengths and strategic advantage (eg, in relation to sustainable development goals, global challenges etc).

Recommendations

Having established the critical importance – and strengths – of cross-disciplinary research in some key areas of current government R&I focus, the report makes four recommendations which would make a tangible difference in boosting the availability of high-quality social science to support it:

- 1) Building on the Grant Review, and recent initiatives such as [UKRI's cross-council responsive mode funding scheme](#), we recommend that UKRI progressively scale up investments in interdisciplinary research, training and leadership. These could receive further targeted support from 2025 onwards under the next Spending Review, centred on the ESRC which has a vital role to play as a facilitator and amplifier of social science and broader transdisciplinary contributions to the wider UK R&I system.
- 2) We recommend a further round of scaled-up investment in policy brokerage within universities and the wider research system. This would build on the contribution of university policy teams, and initiatives such as the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) and Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) over recent years, and the positive focusing effects of departmental Areas of Research Interest (ARIs).
- 3) We recommend social sciences receive greater emphasis in strategies for the responsible development, governance and regulation of new and emerging technologies – including AI. The UK Government's Office for Science and the Department for Science, Innovation & Technology (DSIT) have a particular role to play here and need to develop more integrated strategies for engaging all disciplines in these efforts. We strongly recommend DSIT builds on its recent Science & Technology Framework by working with partners in the social sciences to articulate a Social Science Framework in order to reap the full benefits they offer.
- 4) We recommend the UK ensures active participation in the remaining years of Horizon Europe and plans now for a smooth transition into the 10th Framework Programme. The [recent EU-UK agreement on UK association to Horizon Europe](#) is very welcome, particularly given the framework's strong commitment to multidisciplinary social science and STEM research. The long wait for this agreement has had detrimental effects on UK research, and it will take a concerted effort on all sides to repair networks, connections and confidence levels that have suffered as a result. And preparations must start now for the next Framework Programme, which runs from 2028, to ensure that the UK is as centrally engaged as possible under its associated status. This will require sustained investment from UK funders and universities in network-building and the soft infrastructures of international collaboration. In parallel, valuable groundwork that went into the UK's Pioneer programme (as a potential alternative to association) must not be entirely lost, and elements of this broader international strategy should be salvaged and supported through further investment in the next Spending Review.