

Research Report

Commercialisation and Policy Research

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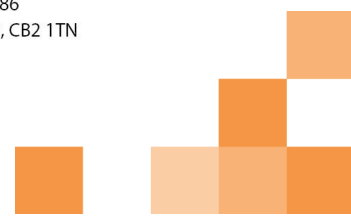
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Commercialisation of Research out of the Social Sciences (CRoSS)**

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On 27th October 2022, Cambridge Enterprise and the Centre for Science and Policy (CSaP) organised a roundtable discussion involving social sciences researchers, policymakers, representatives from large and small research organisations and knowledge exchange experts working in the policy space.

The objective was to discuss whether a research commercialisation approach or entrepreneurial mindset could help create better impact outcomes for policy research. The choice of topic emerged as a response to increased interest from funding bodies, academic researchers, and private and public sector actors for commercial applications of innovative and impactful research outputs, including from social science disciplines.

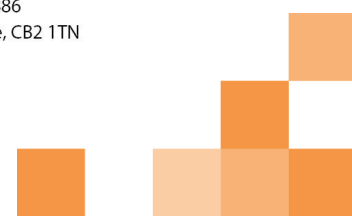
The bottom-line answer to the question was yes, **commercialisation can lead to better impact outcomes for policy research**. However, we also learnt that the route to impact through commercialisation is not straightforward, and several challenges emerge when academic research, academic institutions, and the policy world interface.

Opportunities come from the replicability and scalability of the innovative approaches generated by academics through their research, particularly if they focus on non-traditional approaches that can lead to addressing compelling questions and providing solutions to specific challenges. **Opportunities emerge too from the networks and the partnerships generated by the interactions happening at the personal and institutional levels.**

Gearing up those mechanisms can provide benefits to social science researchers. It will allow them to increase impact while working with government and private sector organisations to deliver high-quality research innovations. The above implies the alignment of good enough incentives for the researcher, the research institution (**the supply side**) and the policy world (**the demand side**). This 'alignment' does not happen by chance and requires coherence of actions and intentions from all involved.

In thinking about the applicability of commercialisation to social science researchers within our institution, **we have conceptualised the commercialisation of research out of the social sciences as market-based solutions to channel academic expertise in solving real-world problems and addressing societal challenges.**

Market-based solutions comprise many arrangements, such as licensing innovative tools, creating new companies (including social ventures), carrying out consultancies, and bringing



about 'entrepreneurial' pathways to impact as an alternative way to unlock the work's value to society.

Below we highlight opportunities and challenges from the demand and supply sides.

The supply side

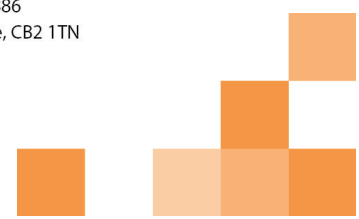
One of the crucial initial steps emerging from the discussion for the successful commercialisation of research out of the social sciences is the creation of **awareness around commercialisation and impact** so that academic researchers can get expert advice early in their research journey.

Intellectual property (IP) management is also essential to find flexible models for new tools and innovative methodologies to be brought to market, generating the right incentives for both the demand and the supply sides. However, whilst patentable assets are a key currency for STEM subjects, faster-moving copyright and know-how require a different approach. An example is non-exclusive licencing, which allows specific research tools or methodologies – questionnaires, toolkits, handbooks, datasets and software tools – to be transposed into commercial settings while freeing the researchers' time to focus on other research.

IP management also includes the **contractual arrangements needed to generate opportunities for use and learning**, particularly when research is co-created with beneficiaries and partners and impact is at the centre. Revenues, visibility and branding for the researcher and the institution where the IP originated are essential factors, but they also matter for the user/partner of that research. Therefore, contracts should be devised and managed so that expertise and IP combined create and release value for the parties involved.

Consultancy remains the dominant way policy-relevant research is commercialised from the social sciences. However, **carrying out academic consultancies can provide opportunities beyond the delivery of a one-off project, creating and strengthening collaborations** that can provide impetus and opportunities for new academic research. Doing consultancy will also 'open doors' by building relationships which then become the foundation of networks and partnerships, and with that, more research funding alongside the possibility of generating significant revenue streams for the researcher and their research group.

The process above is a snapshot of how academic institutions can offer support through translational services (for example, technology transfer offices and other support services).



This support would **enable academic institutions and researchers to work with different ecosystem actors** interested in 'linking up' to specific research areas. As such, researchers should be encouraged to explore the ecosystem. The University's institutions should also be able to facilitate partnerships through proactive participation in diverse ecosystems and adequate support for network creation.

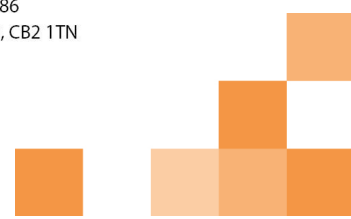
However, whilst there are benefits for policy researchers to engage with commercialisation, barriers also exist. For example, **concerns may arise around the quality, novelty and originality of commercially driven output**, contributing to a broader view within the academic research culture that disincentivises researchers from undertaking translational work in the policy space.

Consequently, the perceived lack of institutional support and awareness around the support available to them generates a negative loop where **social science researchers do not translate enough**, and if they do, it is not done as systematically as in STEM subjects. Instead, expertise is occasionally deployed for the moment and often through personal networks.

However, one of the points agreed upon in the discussion is that **the dichotomy between consultancy and academic research is only arbitrary**, particularly when consultancy output is underpinned by research skills of the highest standard that yield quality outcomes (which is the case in academic research environments). Hence, simple processes to facilitate high-quality consultancy from academic research should be encouraged in academic environments and adequately supported by academic administrations.

In addition, there was consensus that both existing routes to commercialisation of policy research (e.g. consultancy and knowledge exchange) and emerging ones (e.g. tech, data licensing, spinout/start-up) **can lead the market rather than being market-led** when translated into the commercial world if the tools and methodologies created are novel. The interaction with the commercial world and the ecosystem is essential to identify the relevant questions and novel ways to engage with real-world problems, leading to better impact.

In this space, it is important to **understand what commercialisation means, productisation's processes and how to transform research ideas and output into products**. Activities and outcomes can be framed differently depending on the audience and the objectives of a specific research project. For example, in consultancies, researchers can use the language of impact or commercialisation as opportunities for engagement arise. The above requires being able to devise language 'to get the ears' of different audiences. However, these skill sets are



not necessarily embedded in how academic researchers think about sharing and applying their research. They are also not embedded in the training and skill development frameworks.

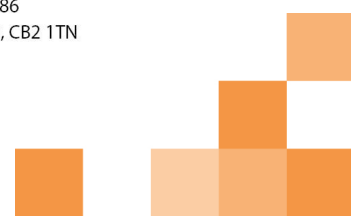
Establishing long-term partnerships can also be problematic, as university administrations may lack agility in several administrative nodes, hampering links with key ecosystem players. The additional challenge for policy research from social science disciplines is that the ecosystems relevant to them are not necessarily self-evident. The above reduces the possibilities that usually originate from established pipelines (such as in STEM) for new ideas to be brought to fruition.

Finance is an additional **supply-side challenge for social science research commercialisation**, particularly at the early stage. Early-stage support can become a problem in deep-tech environments where venture capital (and other forms of financing) may be interested in certain returns and types of IP structures that social science research output cannot offer. This creates a problem of scalability regardless of revenue capabilities.

In deep-tech environments, institutional support for social sciences may lag. However, precisely in these contexts, it is essential to have mechanisms in place to understand what the landscape can offer, creating better ways to map the ecosystem. In such cases, social sciences alone might not represent the most viable pathway, but helpful **connections across disciplines can be made to provide gateways for collaborations and up-scaling**.

As such, a strategy can be for social scientists to engage in multidisciplinary research, as social science research is uniquely placed to understand the world in which technologies are used. Moreover, universities are also uniquely positioned to facilitate these processes. By enabling partnerships and mapping and engaging the ecosystem, they can effectively link researchers to those questions and problems relevant to outside partners, facilitating the creation of multidisciplinary teams to respond to real-world challenges.

The above reaffirms the **importance of managing networks and partnerships effectively**. **Building networks and strengthening capabilities in maintaining those connections** is essential, along with maintaining institutional memory about interactions with those networks, as collaborations may take time to develop. Developing partnerships to solve societal problems is also essential to build or strengthen a reputation for quality outcomes, as social sciences can offer much more than *ad hoc* short-term collaboration.



The demand side

In government and the private sector alike, the perception is that innovation and research commercialisation are almost exclusively a matter concerning STEM subjects. So, the idea that the social sciences could have a role is remarkable but challenging. As mentioned above, **projects crossing the social sciences divide with other disciplines may have a better appeal for collaboration opportunities.** Multidisciplinary strategies will also make innovations originating from the social sciences financially more viable.

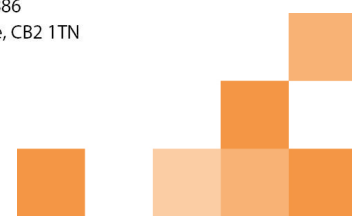
One of the challenges is, for example, **demonstrating the impact of research-based social science interventions.** Public and private sectors have a fast turnaround and work within short timeframes. STEM subjects have the advantage of having standard routes to determine effectiveness, and research outputs are generally tangible. However, it becomes difficult for social sciences to do translational research on the promise that something will eventually work, as social sciences research outcomes often depend on contextual factors.

In the public sector, politics, dominant narratives and strategies may hamper policy dialogue and, consequently, have a downstream impact on novel research and approaches if those do not match the appetite for quick and visible solutions. **The public and the private sectors often require effective short-term solutions that work for the moment rather than more comprehensive approaches.** This clashes with how social scientists engage with a particular problem and propose solutions.

Establishing trusted networks and a reputation for quality research can be instrumental in matching the demand requirements for short-term actionable insights while reducing the uncertainties of longer-term engagements. Furthermore, creating a reputation (both as an individual and as an organisation) would allow the possibility to work on new theories and use new methods and approaches, even if the impact is only visible within a longer timeframe.

Partnerships will also **allow the co-creation and co-production of questions and solutions** tailored to different timeframe requirements with positive implications for longer-term engagements and the possibility of accessing an institution's diverse pool of expertise.

The above has the potential to bridge another problem highlighted during the discussion: how to search for and obtain **trusted expertise**, as complex issues often require multidisciplinary approaches and the ability to ask the right questions. However, policy-academia collaborations frequently rely on personal networks.



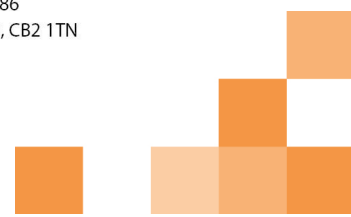
Recommendations

Opportunities offered by commercialisation as an impact route for policy-relevant research come from replicability and scalability, as well as from networks and partnerships generated through interactions with the ecosystem.

Cambridge is full of policy research excellence and knowledge exchange platforms. However, to unlock the strength of these platforms and ensure that the entrepreneurial and commercial opportunities are harnessed from the ecosystem and help deliver impact, we need to integrate commercialisation in the impact framework better, incentivise best practices and clear away bureaucracy in the university systems.

The recommendations below are specific to the 'Cambridge environment'. However, they primarily target institutional changes within a university environment, which can be replicated to support institution-specific reforms. These include:

- **Align the concepts of impact and commercialisation.** 'Commercialisation' as a concept needs reframing and redefining. The research community would benefit from a common language developed around the concepts of impact and commercialisation that can be articulated more coherently to avoid framing too narrowly the range of possibilities for applying impactful research. This could have implications for career prospects for academic researchers at different career stages by thinning the boundaries between academic research and applied translational or practice-based research. It can also have implications for how project proposals and interventions are peer-reviewed to establish the value of their application and implementation.
- **The University needs to be prepared to retain expertise by allowing more porous career paths** and being open to commercial collaborations with government and industry, as academia will not be immune to broader patterns happening in the job market. The University needs to prepare the academic researcher of the 21st century to contribute to driving applied solutions with better methods and rigour. This can be achieved by encouraging multidisciplinary partnerships and industry collaborations across sectors and encouraging the retention of young researchers (student researchers and ECR alike) motivated by impact creation from research.
- **Effective commercial partnerships and engagements with the policy ecosystem** can be achieved by benchmarking other universities' best practices that are known to work effectively in these spaces. This could be achieved by encouraging secondments or 'walkabouts' to identify entry points for improvement.



- **Many pockets of excellence and 'champions' exist in the University** that can work as 'arrowheads' to bring about the desired outcomes around research commercialisation for policy impact without needing to change the whole system. Various research centres and institutions within the University already tap into industry knowledge and devise collaborations while proactively developing networks and partnerships to maximise impact. Interaction should be encouraged between commercialisation and entrepreneurship support services and these existing highly effective policy research and knowledge exchange platforms.
- There is a need to **understand the disincentives around commercialisation and impact from a researcher's perspective**, but also to understand better the multiple layers of intersections from the university administration to the researcher and the award system that the government manages.

About CRoSS - [Cambridge Enterprise \(CE\) is organising a series of events](#) to present Cambridge's response to UKRI Economic and Social Research Council's new CRoSS programme. CRoSS explores how commercialisation can promote and scale the impact of social science research for wider societal benefit. We conceptualise the commercialisation of research out of the social sciences as market-based solutions to channel academic expertise in solving real-world problems and addressing societal challenges. Market-based solutions comprise many arrangements, including licensing innovative ideas and tools, consulting or creating new companies (including social ventures), and bringing about 'entrepreneurial' pathways to impact.

