

Announcing the Nine Dots Prize – tackling social issues through creative thinking

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*Today marks the launch of the inaugural Nine Dots Prize, a new award that aims to encourage creative thinking in tackling contemporary societal issues. **Jane Tinkler**, Senior Prize Manager, explains the rationale behind the establishment of the award, outlines its eligibility criteria and reveals details of the winner's prize.*



Today sees the launch of a new prize – the [Nine Dots Prize](#), which seeks to encourage creative thinking that tackles contemporary social issues. It is sponsored by the Kadas Prize Foundation and supported by CRASSH at the University of Cambridge and Cambridge University Press. Its inaugural question, chosen by our 12-strong board, is: 'Are digital technologies making politics impossible?' Entrants must respond to the question in 3,000 words. The winner will receive \$100,000 to support the writing up of the short response into a book to be published by Cambridge University Press.

There is a long history of prizes being used as a way to reward great writing, great research and outstanding achievements. The use of prizes to find solutions for contemporary problems is perhaps most established in the sciences. In 1714 the [British government offered an award of £20,000](#) (about £2.5million at today's value) to the person who could find a way of determining a ship's longitude. British clockmaker John Harrison won the first Longitude Prize and by doing so improved the safety of long-distance sea travel.



Image credit: ninedotsprize.org

However, across all disciplines, prizes are being enthusiastically taken up again. Since 2000, more than 60 prizes with awards greater than \$100,000 have been created. Prizes are seen as ways to reward excellence, drive change on practical and social goals, support collaboration and build networks involving the public, as well as the private and public sectors. Many of these goals have also been claimed as part of activities undertaken to try to create

impact from academic work.

A look across the REF impact case studies shows that prizes can also be (alongside grant awards and visiting professorships) a useful way of showing a measure of esteem for authors or their research. Around 760 of the case studies submitted in 2014 mentioned having been awarded prizes or prize-winning in their text, just over 10 per cent of the total number of impact cases.

In some ways, the use of prizes as measures of esteem is understandable as they are often awarded in recognition of a long and valuable career, given to those whose mark has already been made in the field. We, however, are looking for innovative thinking, whether this comes from new voices or experienced authors. The Nine Dots Prize will be judged by our board, comprised of 12 internationally renowned scholars, thinkers and writers. Each submission will remain anonymous to the board of judges, so the winner will know they have been chosen not because of their past work or current institution but based on the strength of their ideas and their ability to communicate them effectively.

The largest group of impact cases that mentioned prizes was in Panel D, the Arts and Humanities (with 310 cases). That fits with the numerous book prizes that reward excellent literary fiction and non-fiction. Meanwhile, 'incentive' prizes, those that motivate applicants to focus their energies on a particular – often very specific – goal, are much more common in the science subjects. And here the financial awards from prizes can be significant. For example, the modern [Longitude Prize](#) has a fund of £10million for winning projects that tackle global antibiotic resistance.



Image credit: Anthony Upton

The Nine Dots Prize does provide a focus in that it sets a question that applicants must respond to. However this is not proscriptive, applicants are encouraged to focus on what the question means to them and to respond to that. We are therefore expecting submissions to be wildly varied. A new question will be set at the beginning of each Prize cycle but as all will focus on issues that affect society, the Prize's heartland is in the social sciences. That said, responses from all fields, disciplines, sectors and sets of experience will be eligible and we welcome responses that draw on any disciplines and demonstrate cross-disciplinary thinking. This is important in terms of impact. Again, of those impact case studies that mention prizes, nearly three quarters are classified as interdisciplinary. Evaluations of the REF generally showed that it was interdisciplinary research that underpinned the majority of cases that created impact.

Only 14 of the impact case studies mentioning prizes were joint submissions, which may reflect that it is more common to give prizes to single candidates. Individual authors are welcome to apply to the Nine Dots Prize, however we do allow collaborative responses. Authors, whether individually or jointly, are encouraged to answer the question in whatever way makes most sense to them. Where more than one author is submitting, however, it must be made clear how they will work together to provide a coherent response and book. (Proposals that put forward a number of authors all contributing single sections, such as an edited collection, will not be accepted.)

And much like impact, the ability to communicate will be key if the Prize's aim of supporting creative thinking that tackles contemporary societal issues is to be achieved. To help this process, the Prize award of \$100,000 is intended to enable the winner to take time out to complete a thoughtful and accessible book. The book contract with Cambridge University Press will come with support from editors, and there is the option of a term's visiting fellowship at CRASSH at the University of Cambridge, to help the writing process. The winner's book will be freely available online, and we hope this will encourage global public engagement and discussion about the ideas contained within it.

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.

About the author

Jane Tinkler is Senior Prize Manager for the Nine Dots Prize, a new prize which seeks to encourage creative thinking that tackles contemporary societal issues. For more information about the Prize, visit the [website](#) or follow [@NineDotsPrize](#) on Twitter.

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