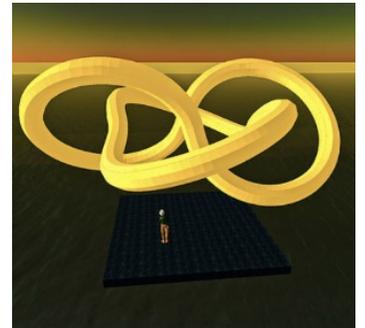


Social science embedded in science: Innovation depends on greater understanding of attitudes and social processes.

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2015/03/03/business-of-people-social-science-innovation/

3/3/2015

*The labour market is filled with social science graduates and postgraduates shaping the evolution of the UK's comparative advantage. Growth depends on the service sector innovating and improving productivity. Without a better grasp of people and their motives, technological advances may fail to realise their potential and may be frustrated or blocked. **David Walker** introduces a new report from the Campaign for Social Science which argues that 2015 is the time for social science to fly its flag from the mast of growth and productivity improvement.*



Social science already has a lot to be confident about; its centrality can only grow. Government ministers, business leaders and other wielders of power in economy and society increasingly recognise the need to invest in research, data and the social science skill set. Policy makers' appetite for evidence from analysis and experiment is sharper than ever; executives in the financial, energy, transport as well as retail sectors demand better intelligence on consumers and behaviour; internet-based companies are now appointing chief social science officers. The third sector turns to social science to help measure impact, to persuade donors of their effectiveness.

Of course everything in the garden isn't lovely. Look at the parties' spending plans; social science suffers from a still prevalent institutional bias, in the corporate sector, in government and in higher education. So of course social science has to fight its corner – hence *The Business of People*, the Campaign for Social Science's new report on its growing significance. But enough, we say, of past defensiveness.

The UK labour market has a stock of nearly 2,000,000 graduates with social science training. They form large proportions of the workforce in [business](#), [education](#), [government and the third sector](#). They advise on children's use of the internet; they measure the public acceptability of [shale gas extraction](#) and high-speed railways; they help insurers understand the changing [contours of risk](#); they measure and refine the Barnett formula and (not just in Manchester) provide concepts and data for understanding devolution, investment flows and labour market dynamics.

The 500,000 people with postgraduate training in social science do planning and analysis in firms and public bodies; they operate in marketing, strategy and general management; they produce and exploit socio-economic data on households, consumers and travel-to-work areas. Social scientists are working on growth, banking regulation and the supply of credit to small firms, apprenticeships, shale gas extraction, e-tailing, new patterns of commuting, high-frequency trading, the evolution of UK comparative advantage, local economic partnerships. They are working on the [shape, population and performance of cities](#), school attainment and a mass of projects in developing and emerging countries.

THE BUSINESS OF PEOPLE

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE
OVER THE NEXT DECADE



Social science is an ecosystem embracing teaching as well as research, practice as well as professors. Selling abroad and sustaining the UK's diplomatic standing and 'soft power' depend on attracting student and research commissions from abroad – where social science has a tremendous track record. Knowledge generation and application are truly international and UK-based social scientists punch above their weight, as attested by citation indices and global benchmarking reviews.

It's not social science *instead* of 'science' but social science *embedded* in 'science'. In tackling communicable disease, productivity, the digital economy or energy security we need innovation and growth in technology, the life and physical sciences but also, critically, deeper understanding of attitudes, institutions, behaviour and socio-economic process. The development and application of science depend on profitability, markets, organisations and public attitudes. All are social science themes. Breakthrough – for example in exploiting [the vastness of Big Data](#) — will necessarily be cross-disciplinary.

The Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council asks social scientists to help companies forecast demand more accurately and plan logistics, develop remote diagnosis in healthcare, improve accessibility in urban transport and supply chains in construction. The National Institute for Health Research is working with social scientists on [patients' experience of community hospitals](#); the Medical Research Council funds sociologists to investigate factors predisposing to poor sleep patterns. In the Home Office, 'science' means engineers and criminologists working together with manufacturers to make cars more difficult to steal. The [Keeping Warm and Well in Later Life](#) project melds knowledge about income, housing design, boilers and the expertise of health visitors. Without a better grasp of people and their motives, technological advances may fail to realise their potential and may be frustrated or blocked.

The [chief scientist](#) at the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (a veterinarian) noted that over badger culling the big gaps in knowledge and understanding were not about disease transmission or herd behaviour but public attitudes, land use, property and farming practice. A similar observation could be made about many public policy problems formerly classed as 'scientific'.

The Department of Health is investing £5 million in the [Cambridge Policy Research Unit on Behaviour and Health](#) because it sees the effectiveness of medical interventions depends on organisation, staff attitudes and patient involvement. The board of (for example) Morrisons plc would have searching questions to put to its [new chief executive](#) if the retailer were not maximising what social science says about family budgets, store location and shoppers' habits and loyalty.

The *Business of People* says that in 2015 – amid debate about strategy for innovation and science and (after the election) another spending review — social science should fly its flag from the mast of growth and productivity improvement. Innovation in the life and physical sciences as in software and machines depends, for its application and exploitation, on parallel innovation in organisations, attitudes and socio-economic process. New ways of working, of engaging staff, of firing the imagination of producers, entrepreneurs and consumers are invaluable in a service economy such as the UK's. They are the province of social science. The UK is predominantly a service economy in which comparative advantage is held by insurance, finance, communications and business services, as much as pharmaceuticals or aerospace. Growth depends on these sectors innovating and improving productivity. Yet if 79 per cent of gross value added comes from the service sector, only 8 per cent of business services firms have cooperative agreements with potential suppliers of insight into organisational performance, indicating the scope for productivity enhancement. That gap is a measure of our potential.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science 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

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