

Addressing societal challenges: Joined-up research funding could facilitate innovation and engagement.

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2015/11/16/addressing-societal-challenges-joined-up-research-funding/

11/16/2015

*With changes looming for research councils and research funding as a whole, **John Goddard** looks at what a more joined-up research council driven by societal challenges would mean for the social sciences. Universities are going to have to increase their capacity to support engagement with society. The social science community therefore needs to actively enter into the fray locally and nationally and demonstrate that they are working alongside colleagues in science, engineering, medicine and the humanities particularly to address societal challenges.*



The Higher Education Green paper “[Fulfilling our potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice](#)” makes a nod towards the forthcoming review of the Research Councils, otherwise known as the [Nurse Review](#). Alongside this review and other funding adjustments expected ahead of the Comprehensive Spending Review, a strong case needs to be made for the social sciences working within a framework overseen by a possible over-arching research council and playing a leading role in cross-disciplinary grand challenges such as health and ageing and sustainable development which are both local and global in nature. This needs to be operationalised within an open innovation ‘quadruple helix’ model of innovation that embraces government (local, national and trans-national), business and civil society. The Government’s Chief Scientist Mark Walport has written a piece in the [Times Higher](#) that is helpful in this regard.

Interestingly Horizon 2020 has a cross-cutting theme of Science With and For Society underpinned by the [Rome Declaration](#). This was adopted by the December Council of Ministers. It calls upon research funding and performing organisations to pursue institutional change to support ‘responsible research and innovation’. This approach has already be adopted by [EPSRC](#).

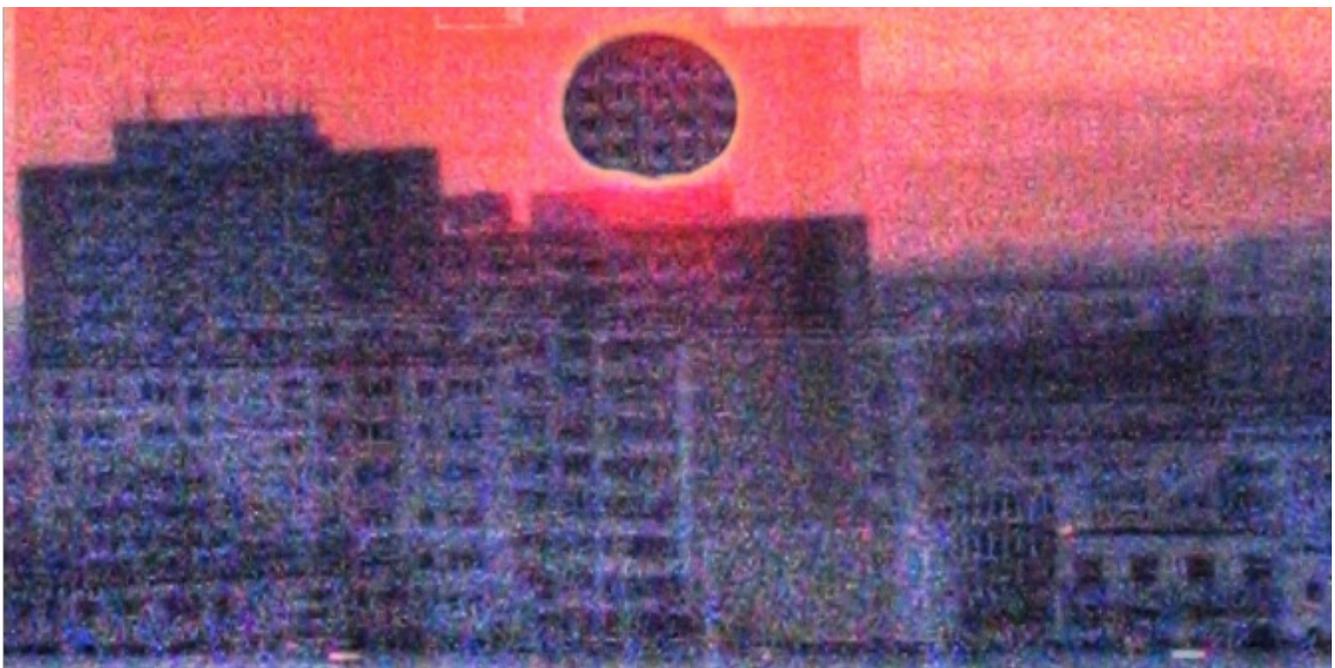


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For this to work universities will need to engage social scientists in challenges which have hitherto been addressed from a technological or medical science ‘fix’ perspective and a linear model of innovation rather than one where societal actors work together in the co-production of knowledge tightly linked to innovation broadly defined. Much of this can come from collaboration locally, hence the need to link to local institutional capacity and the devolution process. See for example the NHS Board [paper on devolution](#).

In this context attention will need to be paid by policy makers to the social science eco-system and its territorial dimension, a system which is vulnerable in the light of the recommendations in the Green Paper with smaller institutions key to their local communities under threat in the market place. This is particularly important in the health domain – we need social scientists throughout the country to work with the NHS, social services and many others to contribute to new ways of delivering healthy living. The RCUK [call on urban living](#) which refers to research that cannot be undertaken by any one research council and which requires collaborative structures with the city in which the host university is based, in many ways anticipates what could be a new model of funding. Again social scientists are key actors here.

The social science community needs to actively enter into the fray locally and nationally and demonstrate that they are working alongside colleagues in science, engineering, medicine and the humanities particularly in their own institutions to address societal challenges not least in terms of the future of the cities in which we are based. We have sought to do this in Newcastle as part of the [Government Office of Science’s Future of Cities programme](#).

For this approach to be taken forward universities are going to have to increase their capacity to support engagement with society and the messy world outside the academy, a world which many social scientists have real experience. In particular institutional support that functions around technology transfer needs to evolve to take account of the need to build partnerships not only with the private sector but also with civil society at large.

Following the lead of some of the foundations, a societal challenge driven research council may want to contract with universities or regional groupings of universities to ensure that they have the capacity to deliver inter-disciplinary collaboration and work with external stakeholders in a non-linear model of innovation.

Going forward one scenario is that HEFCE is reconstituted as a regulatory body with amongst other things a role to ensure that there is capacity in the HE/FE system across the country to contribute to economic and social goals. Again capacity and capability in the social sciences across a spectrum of HEIs to engage locally in different cities and regions will be necessary to ensure this happens.

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.

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