


# Open data sheds light on how universities are minority providers of commissioned research to government.

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/03/20/open-data-government-commissioned-research/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/03/20/open-data-government-commissioned-research/)

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*Anyone under the impression that universities are the dominant suppliers to government of commissioned research, advice, and knowledge, think again. Open data on government spending shows the relative dominance of other suppliers and mediators of knowledge to government – not least the private sector and think tanks. **Simon Bastow** presents some preliminary government-wide data.*

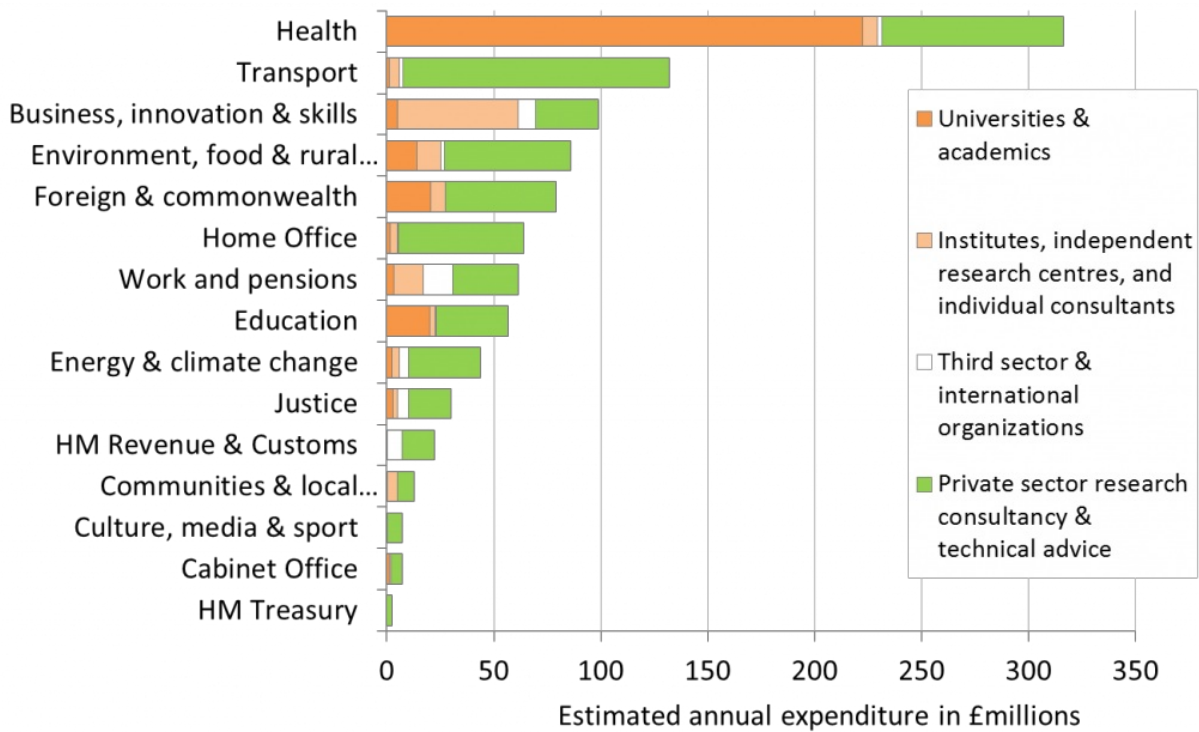


Moves towards more transparent and open publication of government data look promising for anyone interested in public policy impacts of research. As we have shown in our recent book *The Impact of the Social Sciences* (featured here on the right), there has been precious little data available that allows us to compare systematically what government spends on commissioning research – in the social sciences and beyond. So the publication of government spending data at [Data.gov.uk](https://data.gov.uk) has been an important step forward. For the first time, public policy watchers can begin to compile a much more complete (and comparable) picture of the different channels through which government gets its knowledge (and what it pays for it).

Towards the end of last year, I began collecting systematically one year's worth of spending data for each UK central government department (generally from July 2012 to June 2013). In total, more than 755,000 expenditure entries listed basic details about the spending department, date, amount, recipient organization, and brief details about what the expenditure was for. Using a combination of automated word look-up techniques and many hours of manual sorting, interpreting and coding, it was possible to get to a full dataset of expenditure items. Clearly, this comes with a health warning, in that we cannot be completely sure of its comprehensiveness given inevitable inconsistencies in way in which departments have reported data. It is however a start.

With the variables listed above, I estimated how much each department has spent on research and technical advice from external organizations (see **Figure 1** below). This includes all types of research – not just the social sciences. And it includes only the direct spending by the departments, and not the policy sector as a whole. For example, data for the Department of Health does not include research spending by the NHS, just as spending by the Department for Communities and Local Government does not include spending by local authorities.

**Figure 1: Estimated UK central government (only) spending on research and technical consultancy, by type of recipient organization (£ millions)**



**Source:** PPG analysis of government open spending data (2012 – 2013).

**Note:** Spending figures are for central department direct expenditure only and do not include research spending by regional or local bodies. Graph does not include the **Department for International Development** as its numbers are too high and skew presentation.

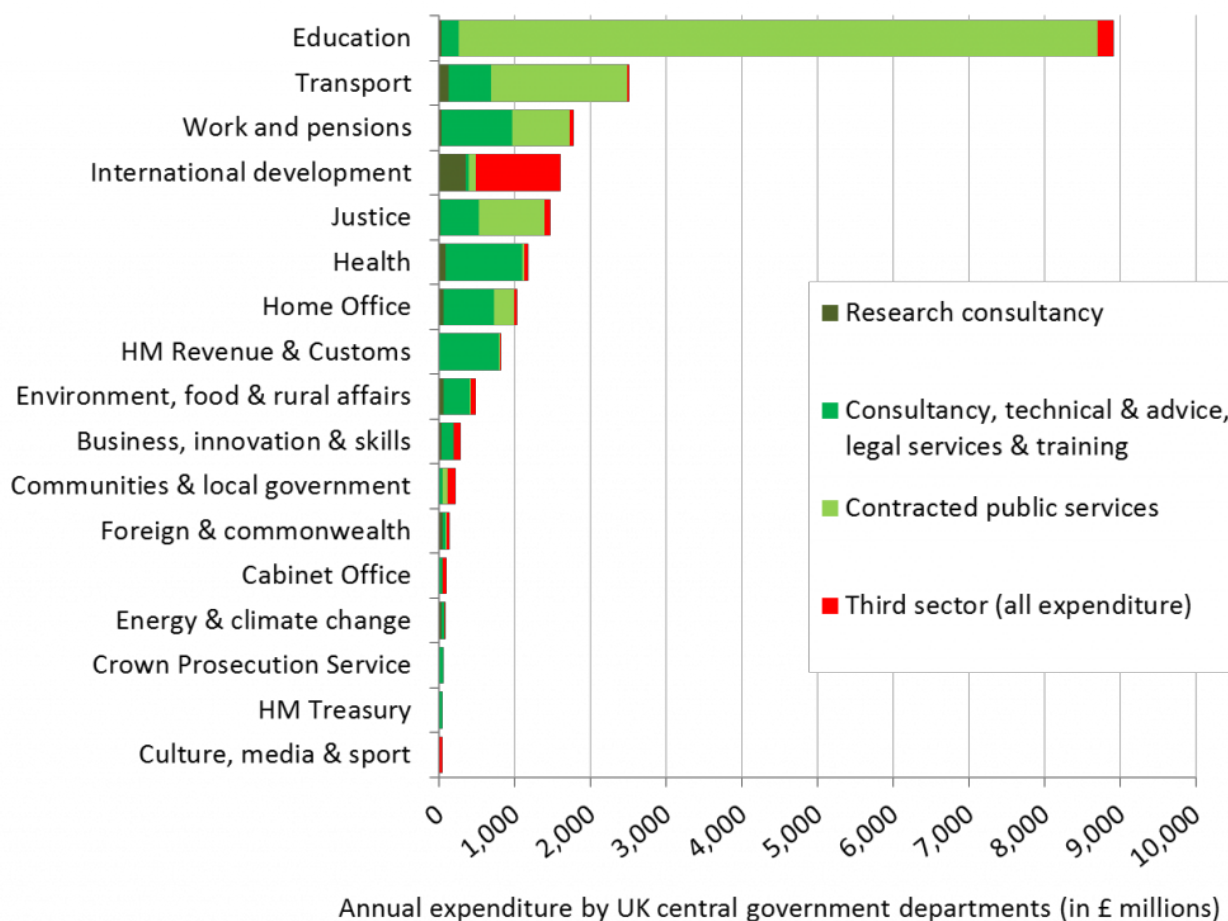
It is clear that universities and academics by no means have a monopoly on supplying government departments with research and advice. In fact, it is only in health that universities can be said to be dominant provider, and the majority of this is accounted for by large STEM-based research programmes. In most departments, private sector firms appear to be a majority provider of research knowledge. And in some sectors, independent research institutes and ‘think tanks’ also play a prominent role.

We can get insights into the importance of external research for different departments. For the Treasury and HMRC, for example, universities and research institutes do not seem to feature at all. Of course, expert knowledge and advice from academia filters in to these organizations through elite committee membership and informal briefings. In other traditionally social science areas, such as the Home Office, we may be surprised by the apparent lack of university and academic presence – likely to be a reflection of slashed departmental research budgets in recent years.

For academics seeking to influence government policy, it is clear from this graphic that private sector firms are important suppliers and mediators of research into government. It would seem too narrow therefore to characterise impact as a bilateral relationship between academics and governments. Clearly, the dynamics of mediation are much broader and involve other (arguably more dominant) actors. In order to influence policy, academics might do just as well in attempting to influence private sector actors who themselves influence policy.

This potential looks considerably bigger when we factor in the entirety of government spending that flows to the private sector, not just for research but for the wide variety of consultancy and business services, as well as spending relating to contracted-out ‘frontline’ services. **Figure 2** puts this in perspective. The darkest green blocks show money flowing to private firms for research-specific consultancy (featured in Figure 1 above), and superimposes money flowing for other consultancy, technical advice, training (mid green), and contracted public services (light green).

**Figure 2: Estimated UK central government (only) expenditure flowing to private sector and third sector organizations (£ millions)**



**Note:** Spending figures are for central department direct expenditure only and do not include research spending by regional or local bodies.

It is clear from Figure 2 that education somewhat distorts the presentation of government departments' spending to the private sector. Due to difficulties in coding many items of spending relating to education reforms, it is hard to say what the exact breakdown is between spending that relates to consultancy and that which relates to actual provision of education services. Either way, we can estimate this potential market at somewhere in the region of £9 billion per year. In transport, work and pensions, justice, and home affairs, we also find considerable markets in frontline public services, all of which include providers that are both hungry for research knowledge and key influencers of government policy. Again, this mediated market for public services research and knowledge cannot be ignored by academic researchers.

Finally, it is worth saying something about how these private sector markets eclipse the size of third sector markets. The exception of course is in international development. However, in key policy sectors that continue to rely on third sector organisations for the delivery of frontline public services, the actual money flowing to these organizations directly seems vanishingly small. This does not bode well for government aspirations to establish viable third sector consortia in competition for new payment by results (PBR) contracts.

*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

**Simon Bastow** is a Senior Research Fellow at the LSE Public Policy Group. He is co-author of the *Impact of Social Sciences: How Academics and Their Research Make a Difference* (SAGE, 2014). Simon has also recently published a book with Palgrave Macmillan 'Governance, performance and capacity stress: The chronic case of prison crowding'.

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