

# There is a lack of durable mechanisms to connect the Professional Service Sector to academic research.

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2013/12/17/professional-service-sector-pathways-to-impact/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2013/12/17/professional-service-sector-pathways-to-impact/)

12/17/2013

*Drawing from interviews with partners in the professional service sector, **Gordon Clubb** investigates the opportunities and barriers facing the take-up of academic research. There is an interest in this sector to engage with academic research, there are resources to fund it, and it could have a substantial impact on business. However, weak cross-sector relationships and clashing institutional norms mean the benefits of collaborative work will continue to struggle unless further mechanisms are created.*



As universities across the UK complete the REF submission, the importance of creating and sustaining pathways to impact for academia is set to grow. Yet, while it is clear how universities can benefit from creating impact, for many researchers it was unclear what pathway partners were needed before impact could even take place. As part of a broader study of government and think tank partners, the Terrorism and Political Violence Association (TAPVA), a network of university researchers, think tanks/NGOs and policy-makers currently based at the University of Leeds, began to identify some of the challenges and opportunities for terrorism and political violence researchers in creating pathways to impact in the Professional Service Sector (PSS), specifically security consultants.

Despite the substantial benefits to both researchers and the service sector from increased collaboration, both sectors remain under-developed in comparison to more traditional pathways such as the Home Office. Poor 'salesmanship', a lack of cross-sector networks, and a lack of previous engagement are the most significant factors in restricting pathways to impact in the service sector. Situated within politics departments, researchers on terrorism and political violence understandably have less impact on the PSS than researchers in the Business School. Instead, they have tended to have had greater impact on traditional sectors such as the government. The PSS, on the other hand, has tended to be overlooked by academics researching terrorism. The PSS most relevant to terrorist researchers are security consultants: the project focused on one major international security consultant firm.



Aviation Worldwide Service CASA C-212 Aviocar in Afghanistan. (CC-BY)

This sector provides briefings to companies that 'scientifically quantify' the risk of terrorism, political instability internationally, and provide services such as a terrorism database and 'terrorism insurance'. Corporations are 'rushing to the developing world but because of this move to invest in the developing world, they don't have a clue what the situation is – that is why they are needing risk assessments'. These assessments can have a substantial impact on whether the company decides to invest in a country, with one oil company reneging on a decision to invest in Iraq on the basis of the assessment making the investment financially unviable. To compile the assessments, the consultant can buy in other risk assessment expertise; utilise personal ties to the security world; use open source data; or can use the firm's in-house political risk department. However, while the consultant recognised the importance of academic research, and recognised that it was an underused tool, there are limitations in the amount of time that can be dedicated to using academic sources – the turn-around time for one assessment is one day. Thus, there is an interest in this sector to engage with academic research, there are resources to fund it, and it could have a substantial impact on business. However, there are a number of obstacles that limit the sector's potential as an impact pathway partner.

The PSS differs from traditional sectors in terms of the role staff play as potential pathways to impact. Government departments are far more active in engaging with academia institutionally, therefore making any potential pathway not necessarily dependent on personal connections and thus more durable. The Home Office have a tendering service to encourage academic collaboration and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office researchers regularly attend academic conferences. Staff posts are often filled with former academics or PhD students with their own personal networks helping them to understand the benefits of academia and providing them with contacts to reach out to for recommendations. Therefore there are a number of durable mechanisms to facilitate knowledge exchange in government. The PSS is far more dependent on personal relationships, it is less embedded in academia, and, consequently, any pathways that are developed are less durable. The firm that the project focused on tends to work primarily through one member of staff, who is recruited on the basis of personal networks in the security service and government, therefore limiting the likelihood that they are aware of academics in the field personally. Furthermore, as the consultant is recruited because their personal connections give them access to the security world, there is a higher turn around in staff when these personal connections begin to disappear, either through retirement or

promotion. This weak cross-sector relationship means that the PSS does not immediately see the benefits of collaborative work with academia as much as the government departments do.

Given the security background of the consultants, there is a tendency to perceive government officials to be more reliable sources of information, whereas there is uncertainty on the credibility of academics. While this may be surprising when contrasted with the public perception of academia being more credible, government interviewees also highlighted the problems they face in selecting who to work with. In addition to distinguishing between academics that embellish their achievements, pathway partners find it difficult to identify academics who can communicate clearly and effectively. As a consequence, they tend to rely on personal networks or London-based universities, which can be at the detriment of institutions such as the University of Leeds. In the same vein, significant emphasis was placed on the need for academics to package and deliver their reports in a way that can compete with professional risk assessments. While universities already seek to help academics frame research in a way that can maximise impact, the unfamiliarity in politics departments with PSS-specific formats, such as (insurance) risk assessments, acts as a barrier to communicate with the PSS as a potential pathway. This lack of communication, in addition to staff members being drawn from a non-academic background, goes some way to explain why, 'for businesses, academia is a mysterious cloud – businesses don't know what academia can offer, and academia does not know what businesses are seeking'.

*This analysis was informed by a series of interview conducted with the consultancy firm, former intelligence officers, the Home Office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.*

*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**

**Gordon Clubb** is a PhD researcher at the University of Leeds and is the co-ordinator of the Terrorism and Political Violence Association. The research project was funded by TAPVA, the Business School and the Social Sciences faculty at Leeds.

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