

Five Minutes with Neil Carberry, CBI: “To the extent that there is accessible academic work there, it will be used”

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Part of PPG's Impact of Social Sciences project focuses on how academic research in the social sciences influences decision-makers in business, government and civil society. [Rebecca Mann](#) talked to [Neil Carberry](#) of the CBI about the use of social science research in the business community.



From your personal experience, do you think that social science research is widely used in the business community in the UK?

I was chatting to a social science academic from the States three or four months ago. He ventured the opinion that one of the issues is that, in the United States academics tend to do research with business. In the UK, they do research about business, and that is quite an important distinction. So I think there's more to do.

How do you think businesses are currently using social science research?

Lots of my members have business analysts on board and the first thing they do when they have a problem to solve is to go out there and Hoover up all the facts they need to make a decision. To the extent that there is accessible academic work there, it will be used. When supply is available and people see it as available, you begin to get an expectation that you can deliver high quality business analysis by turning to academic research.

Does the CBI itself use social science research?

We are users of data published in peer-reviewed journals, but from time to time we have worked with the universities who engage with the CBI as members on specific issues. I think that given the nature of our services as an organisation – we are research-led – we probably have more time to assimilate things that are written in a slightly less accessible or business friendly style than the average firm. It's true to say that the research that we use takes some time to penetrate and we probably use more research because we have the time to do that.

A classic example of research that we have used at the CBI is research by academics in connection with the Low Pay Commission on minimum wage setting in the UK economy that we refer to in setting our policy on national wages on an annual basis. The other thing I would point to is some of the work that David MacLeod has done on the New Task Force for employee engagement. That's a really interesting tying together of some of the academic evidence on employee engagement with a real commitment to the business community to move that forward.

We mostly just read academic research output although from time to time we will reach out to research academics to ask them questions about some of their observations. There are few people we have a longstanding relationship with but for the most case it is as and when.

What kind of role can the CBI play in facilitating collaboration between businesses and universities?

I think our role at the CBI is twofold. We are macro consumers of some of this research but the other is in terms of fostering some of the local clusters and central clusters that we need to underpin local economic growth and regeneration strategies. So if you look at the strength of research universities in the northwest – Lancaster, Manchester, Liverpool – how do we bring that research strength to bear to support the region's medium sized businesses? And what does that look like? And certainly, that clustering and networking is something the CBI would be interested in supporting.

Does the CBI interact with universities on these kind of issues?

Around eighty universities are members of the CBI. As a result of their membership, we get a better quality of debate about some of the critical issues around business innovation and hard skills development. I think the universities get access to discussions around local economic strategy and some of the networks they need to be building. Also, fundamentally, large higher education institutions are businesses; they are large employers and create employment, so there is a level of engagement with them just as businesses.

What steps can universities take to increase the uptake of social science research by business?

We need to acknowledge the fact that many universities just exist in a different orbit to businesses. And how you start to develop a bit of a Venn-diagram, with some overlap, I think is the critical part.

I think direct contact between businesses, academics and universities is the right discussion to foster. I also think it comes down of this question of clusters. If you are an institution and you have a particular strength in four or five particular areas of the social sciences and in you're in a city with five or ten large businesses, and you can map on pretty clearly where the touch points are between those, then you should start building networks around them. From that seed, start to grow the network in the city of people who do think that wide enough to engage academics with work.

Note: This article gives the views of the interviewee, and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

About the interviewee:

Neil Carberry is Director for Employment and Skills at the CBI. Before becoming director, Neil spent four years as Head of Employment and Pensions Policy and he has previously worked in the CBI's public services team as Head of Public Procurement.

About the interviewer:

Rebecca Mann is a researcher with the LSE Public Policy Group. She holds a Master of Public Administration from the LSE and degrees in Law and Economics from the University of Sydney.

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