

5 Minutes with Richard Lambert: “It’s a real shortcoming that academics are not good at communicating their research to the outside world”

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11/2/2012

As part of the *Impact of Social Sciences’ project interview series*, [Richard Lambert](#) tells [Rebecca Mann](#) of the opportunities for social scientists in the world of business, and the need for intermediaries to translate academic research into arguments that readers can understand.



Ten years on from the [Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration](#), are the lessons in that report relevant to the social sciences?

The Lambert Review was a reporting exercise focussed mainly on sciences where we collected data and anecdotes, trying to speak to as many people as we could. The brief was to investigate the claim that ‘we do all this great science and but it doesn’t get translated enough’.



There would be a good case for doing a lot of work on the social sciences in this area too. There are challenges of course; it’s probably easier to measure the impact of engineering and the hard sciences than philosophy. But there are real collaboration opportunities in the social sciences as well. For example, there was an [article](#) in Fortune Magazine about how many of the companies in high tech industries in the US are hiring cultural anthropologists to try and get a handle on how people use their products and what people are looking for – Intel, Microsoft, Xerox. Social scientists can really help these companies because their engineers are looking to make the fastest strongest machines but that’s not necessarily what customers want, especially outside the US.

What obstacles or issues are reducing the impact of the social sciences in the private sector?

Some responsibility here lies with business. I think if you look at the UK, our firms relate less to universities than in other countries. There is a long tail of businesses that contain or are run by people who have never been to university, and don’t care about universities.

However, it’s a real shortcoming that academics are not very good at communicating their research findings to the outside world. There are some brilliant people around, and they should be more exploited than they are. But commissioning academics to write about business matters while I was at the FT was difficult, often substantial rewriting was necessary or it was unprintable. Business is an area where you’d expect there would be high visibility of academic work, but there wasn’t. For example, if you think of the business schools – not a lot of business school research finds its way into the public domain.

There is not a huge amount of material published directly by academics in the media. One example is John Kay, visiting professor at the London School of Economics, who has a column in the FT and has almost crossed over. Other academics published regularly are John Van Reenan and Andy Haldane at the Bank of England. They are writing in a non-academic way, essentially.

Accessibility is said to be an issue, but you’d have thought not in a world when everything is online. I can read NBER papers online at any time of day or night. There are some academics who blog and are read by large numbers, but I think that quite a lot of research needs intermediating by writers or journalists like Martin Wolf at the FT, who can write robust arguments in a way that people can understand. During my time on the Monetary Policy Committee, the bank had a large cohort of academic economists who would regularly circulate research papers to the committee, this is one way that academic research could be distributed quite widely in the organisation.

How can social science research help businesses to innovate?

What businesses do is partner with people who think they can help them. That's what open innovation is about, which is a different model to the strategic foresight reports that I have seen in government. Businesses don't sit down and say 'let's gather all the knowledge there is on the planet about a topic, say environmental sustainability, and get sixty people thinking about it for three years'. Business strategies change rapidly. If the CEO gets fired they will have a completely new strategy 18 months later.

It's the open innovation approach which works for business, not the foresight reports. Proctor and Gamble was famously the most secretive company in the world. Then they said 'Half of our new products in the next five years will come from collaboration with those outside our walls'. If you go around to the campuses of some universities you'll see business people wandering around. Brighton University, for example, has a professor who is a whiz on motor engineering, and is back and forth with ideas with companies nearby.

In social science, the ideas aren't linear. You need informal networks of people where a person from one discipline can talk to another person about a shared problem. There are some companies, like Lilly or DuPont, who have an intranet with thousands of people hooked into it around the world. They can run a problem on it and say, who can help with this? One quote I like that I used in the report was from Merck, which is one of the biggest biopharma companies in the world. They did something like 4 per cent of all research in the world, yet said "the cascade of knowledge flowing from biotechnology and the unravelling of the human genome – to name only two recent developments – is far too complex for any one company to handle alone". That's where collaboration comes in. Businesses and universities can learn from each other.

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:

Richard Lambert is the Chancellor of the University of Warwick and previously served as Director-General of the CBI.

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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