ACADEMY of SOCIAL SCIENCES

# Research funding in the UK social sciences 2013/14 to 2021/22



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# Foreword

This report documents the scale and trends in research funding for the social sciences across UK higher education (HE).

The report draws largely on published annual Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) research funding data for the nine academic years between 2013/14 and 2021/22, inclusive. This is data reported to HESA by all higher education institutions in the UK on an annual basis and is inclusive of all research funding received in an institution, from the UK and internationally and from competitively won grants and awards to research consultancy services. It does not include QR funding to institutions arising from the research excellence assessments. All data is adjusted to 2021/22 prices using HMG Treasury GDP indices.

It forms part of the Academy's work to monitor and to inform public audiences about the 'health' of the social sciences in the UK. It also supports our advocacy for the social sciences, as the only body in the UK that exists solely to promote the social sciences sector. It sits alongside the Academy's joint data report with, and funded by, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) on 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in the social sciences' published in May 2024, and it follows on from a joint report (in 2022) with the University of Lancaster on 'Social Sciences in a Time of Change, 2020-2022' also funded by the ESRC (grant: ES/V012118/1).

These reports complement others from the Academy that focus on the substance of social science research and innovation and its impacts, including <u>'The SHAPE of Research Impact</u>' report published (January 2024) in association with the British Academy, and <u>'Reimagining the recipe for research and innovation: the secret sauce of social science</u>' published in January 2024.

We aim to continue to monitor, analyse and report social science research funding data at regular intervals in the future.

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# **Executive summary**

This report forms part of the Academy of Social Sciences' core work to monitor the 'health', standing and impact of the social sciences in the UK. It is based on the research funding reported by universities across the UK to the Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA), all of which is publicly available.

It does not include research undertaken in business and industry, or otherwise completely outside the universities. It covers the period of nine years from 2013/14 to 2021/22 with all values adjusted to 2021/22 values.

The report is important in three ways.

- In sharing knowledge about the quantum, distribution and change over time of research funding for the social science sector as a whole and across disciplines and discipline clusters within it.
- In acting as a reference study for the documentation of change in the future, and in identifying areas of particular concern that the Academy's learned society members may wish to follow up on for 'their' disciplines.
- Most importantly, for the questions it raises about what the UK wants from its social science sector research and the appetite to fund that.

The UK is a world leader in social science research and in the impact of that research, as evidenced in the 2021 Research Excellence exercise: 80% of social science research was world leading (37%) or internationally excellent (43%).

Recent reports by the Academy of Social Sciences and the British Academy further exemplify value for money and impact: social science is fundamental to understanding and helping mitigate many of the economic, social, place-based and environmental challenges we face in the UK, and in contributing to multidisciplinary 'missions'.

We also know that the social sciences are delivering insights for critical areas of public policy. Perhaps most notably social science research informed many dimensions of policy and practice in managing the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Government Office of Science's recently-published database of research priorities is dominated by 'social science' questions.

Yet despite this, the funding differential in real terms between social science research and both medical and biological sciences (M&B) and physical sciences, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) sector funding has grown

ever wider at the same time as social science research and impact has performed better than ever and the need for it is greater than ever. This is a supply constraint not a demand constraint.

In 2021/22 the social sciences sector received 8.3% (£572 m) of the total research funding reported by UK universities, up from 8% in 2013/14; with the funding increasing in real terms by £103 m pa between those two dates. In comparison, the medical and biological sciences sector received 55% (£3.77 bn) in 2021/22, down from 56% in 2013/14, over which period its research funding increased by £477 m pa. The STEM sector received 33% (£2.31bn) in 2021/22, with the overall percentage little changed from 2013/14, and over which period its research funding increased by £360 m pa.

The single largest source of research funds for the social sciences (and for most other sectors) is UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), accounting in 2021/22 for 42% (£242 m) of the sector's total research income. Increases in UKRI funding over the nine years account for more than three quarters of the £103 m increase pa between 2013/14 and 2021/22, and it is widely spread across disciplines.

UK and EU governments each provided around 17% of social science research funding in 2021/22. Unsurprisingly, receipts from the EU Government have been in decline since 2018/19 across all sectors; dropping to below the value of funding in 2013/14 in real terms for the social sciences. Direct UK Government research funding for the sector has been flat, while charity funding (including from trusts and foundations) has grown modestly over the period to account for 10% of the sector total in 2021/22.

Within the social science sector, the research funding trajectories of different disciplines, and their intersections with academic staff numbers (FTE) differ distinctly. Highest total research income levels are in business and management and geography and environmental studies, the latter partly because it attracts funding from the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) in addition to ESRC, and the former owing more to the large size of the research community.

The social science disciplines with the greatest average funding per staff FTE are anthropology and development studies, geography and environmental studies, and psychology.

The core social science disciplines that have experienced both a growth in staff numbers and relatively high proportional increases in average staff research income (per FTE) include social work and social policy, law, and geography and environmental studies.

However, caution is needed in both interpretation and comparison since disciplines will vary in their requirements for research funding, in their alignment with thematic or topic-led funding calls, and their abilities to tap into multiple research councils, among other reasons.

Two social science areas stand out as markedly different: education and social aspects of health science. Unlike all the other disciplines, both have seen a decrease in total research income pa. in real terms over the nine years, the prime cause being a fall in research funding directly from UK Government. Both have also experienced a drop in staff FTE numbers. In education the levels of average research funding per FTE have been broadly sustained over the time period; but in social aspects of health science there has been a 20% drop in levels of average research funding per staff FTE. Both are areas of considerable public expenditure, policy challenge and public concern. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) will shortly be publishing an independent report on education research funding.

It is within this context that the new UK Government needs to consider whether it is getting as much benefit as it might out of our world-leading social science research base. This is particularly important when so much of its policy agenda – reducing inequalities, improving access to services, boosting regional economic growth – is dependent on social science insights and evidence to inform decision-making. Because of this, and arising from the data analysis and contextual changes over the past nine years, we recommend the UK Government and UKRI:

- Review urgently the adequacy of the research funding levels for the social sciences sector, including their involvement in multi-disciplinary, challenge-led research.
- Give additional consideration to the funding of education research and that in the social aspects of health sciences;
- Secure the UK's involvement in the EU Horizon programme for the next round.

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# Introduction: the social sciences



The social sciences comprise one of the four sectors within UK higher education (HE): medicine, health and biological/life sciences (M&B); physical sciences, technology, engineering and maths (STEM); social sciences (SS); and arts and humanities (A&H).

It is the largest sector (Table 1) and features, to varying extents, in almost all higher education institutions (HEIs), excepting some of the small and highly specialised institutions. In the academic year 2021/22 its total enrolled students numbered 893,250 full time equivalent (FTE) and there were 29,235 academic staff FTE employed on 'teaching and research' contracts (source: <u>HESA: Higher</u> <u>Education Student Statistics: UK, 2021/22</u>).

Sector	Student FTE (HESA)	Academic teaching & research staff FTE (HESA)	REF 2021 staff FTE returned	REF Impact Case Studies returned
Medicine, health & life sciences	613,310	27,230	19,983 (A)	1,460 (22%)
Physical sciences, technology, engineering & maths	408,690	19,560	18,391 (B)	1,483 (22%)
Social sciences	893,250	29,235	23,451 (C)	2,260 (33%)
Arts & humanities	367,785	16,240	14,305 (D)	1,578 (23%)

Table 1: Summary of academic staff FTE (teaching and research contracts) and total student FTE data for the four main sectors in UK higher education, 2021/22 (data rounded to nearest 5; HESA: <u>Higher</u> <u>Education Student Statistics: UK, 2021/22</u>); and staff numbers and impact case studies returned in <u>REF 2021 by main panel</u>. The social sciences focus on understanding the contemporary human world, its human systems, their dynamics, interconnections, and interactions with physical, bio-medical, environmental and technological systems. The social sciences include the disciplines of anthropology; business, finance and management; development studies; economics and econometrics; education; geography and environmental studies; law; planning, architecture and the built environment; politics and international relations; social psychology and the social aspects of healthcare; social work and social policy; sociology and criminology; tourism and leisure; plus a number of cross cutting study areas such as regional studies and social statistics, and many sub-disciplinary specialisms.

While social scientists are employed throughout business and industry, the public and third sectors, the majority of the cutting-edge research across the breadth of the social sciences in the UK takes place in the HE sector and related institutes. Most of the funding for that comes from public sources – that is, from the research councils (UKRI) or directly from government(s). Additional sources include trusts and foundations and other charities and from business and industry. Most is awarded competitively as grants for projects or programmes of work or is commissioned through tender.

The UK is a world leader in the social sciences. This was endorsed by the reports from Main Panel C (social sciences) and from the 12 units of assessment within that in the most recent research assessment exercise (REF 2021). 80% of the 54,226 research outputs assessed in social science were regarded as being world leading (37%) or internationally excellent (43%). The 2,260 impact case studies submitted – a higher ratio of case studies to staff than in the science sectors – indicated a wide and deep range of impacts on the social, economic and environmental well-being of the UK and internationally, and wide reach into public sector policy, business, the third sector and public engagement. We also know that social science research is a smart investment, with impact providing value for money. The high number of impact case studies delivered in REF 2021 by the social sciences came despite the social sciences having the second-lowest level of research funding.

A subsequent <u>in-depth analysis of the impact of the social sciences, and arts</u> <u>and humanities</u>, commissioned by the British Academy and the Academy of Social Sciences, based on the analysis of the <u>REF 2021 Impact Case Studies</u>, demonstrated how the research is an investment in people, places and innovation. It pointed to the research as instrumental in tackling societal challenges, bolstering competitive advantage, understanding people and places and empowering communities; and identified eight key themes of impact for the social sciences:

- Education & Teaching
- Business, Economics & Management
- Employment
- Crime & Exclusion
- Family & Gender
- Governments & Law
- Health & Wellbeing
- Sustainability & Infrastructure

A number of cross-cutting themes such as inequality are threaded through them. The report also noted the value for money that research in the social sciences represents.

A second Academy of Social Sciences report in 2024 '<u>Reimagining the recipe</u> for research and innovation: the secret sauce of social science' pointed to the important but presently underdeveloped role of the social sciences in the UK Government's research, development and innovation framework. Providing evidence to exemplify some of the ways that social science research is symbiotic with STEM and M&B research, it identified four themes that the social sciences contribute to cross-sector collaboration:

- · Social sciences enable whole systems thinking
- · Social sciences are critical for good policy development
- Social sciences underpin smart and responsible innovation
- Social sciences are essential to international collaboration and tackling shared global challenges

The importance of, and demand for, research across the social sciences to the UK Government was also highlighted in autumn 2023 by the launch of a new 'Areas of Research Interest' database by the Government Office of Science. This makes available in one place the key research questions that departments across the UK Government are interested in to inform their work and policy. It has been estimated that over 75% of the areas of interest comprise wholly or largely social science questions.

The important contribution of the social sciences, humanities and arts to understanding the potential long term societal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic were the focus of a <u>British Academy report in 2021</u>, commissioned by the Government Office of Science.

The use of the social sciences to the private business sector was the focus of the Academy of Social Sciences report '<u>Vital Business</u>' in 2020. In depth interviews with business leaders from major engineering and mining corporations to multi-national financial services and engineering consultancies revealed the essential importance of social science expertise and research across their activities, from management, strategic planning and innovation to marketing, customer services and international trade and diplomacy.

All of the above demonstrate that UK social science research is vibrant, world leading, and in demand. And it makes a substantial difference. Many millions of people in the UK and globally already benefit from that impact.

In short, research and development in the social sciences is vital for the UK if we are to:

- Understand our own people, places, communities and economies and their intersections and dynamics;
- Stay abreast of understanding rapid contemporary changes from global geopolitics to climate change – their nature, causes, consequences and interdependencies, nationally and globally;
- Benefit from the application of that understanding to enhance the economy, society and lives in the UK and beyond, and to manage risk; and
- Address major 'missions' and challenges identified by the new UK Government, including reforming childcare and education, sustained regional and national economic growth, net zero and sustainability, building an NHS fit for the future, as well as addressing inequality, the housing crisis and future emergencies such as pandemics.

Sustained research and development funding in the social sciences is essential in underpinning this contribution and in training and securing the next generation of researchers. The question then arises, how and how well funded are the social sciences, and is the funding keeping pace?

# Data and methodology



The underpinning data in this report is largely sourced from the <u>annual financial</u> <u>data published by the Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA)</u> for the nine academic years between 2013/14 and 2021/22, inclusive (note: HESA data for <u>2013/14</u> and <u>2014/15</u> can be found separately.).

A selection of that data has been analysed, summarised and visualised to provide an understanding of:

- How the social sciences fare in comparison with the other three major sectors of arts & humanities (A&H); medical and biological sciences (M&B); and physical sciences, technology, engineering and maths (STEM).
- The patterns over time, and variations between, the individual cost centres into which HESA classifies the data for the social sciences. This has been done for both cost centre totals and standardised per FTE staff numbers employed on research and teaching contracts.

The data on employed staff is also sourced from annual HESA publications of staff and student data.

HESA data, while the most consistent, complete and the best available information source for research funding, is not without some caveats. The data is collected and reported individually to HESA by all higher education institutions in the UK, using the HESA standardised cost centre categories. The cost centres align broadly to major disciplines and discipline groups. Income is attributed where it occurs and it includes both competitively won research funding and that received through other routes such as commissioned research and research consultancy services.

However, there is some discretion, and institutions may vary in how they choose to align some sub-discipline areas into the main HESA cost centres and in how they allocate grant funding to cost centres in the case, for example, of multi-disciplinary grants with multiple principal investigators (PIs) within an institution. Where there are multiple PIs in different institutions the share of income for each will normally be reported by 'their' institution within the appropriate cost centre.

The reported data includes funding from UK Research Councils (UKRI and formerly RCUK), directly from the UK Government, and from UK Charities and industry sources, and from UK-other sources. Sources beyond the UK are classified into EU Government (including the Horizon programme), EU Other and Non-EU. The data does not include QR funding to institutions arising from the research excellence assessments. All data in this report has been adjusted to 2021/22 prices using HMG Treasury GDP indices.

The data captured by HESA is research grant or contracted income received in HEIs in each academic year. As such, it is equivalent to the research grant expenditure in HEIs in the year. The data is not the total value of successful awards approved in any given year. For example, a four year approved award would normally be drawn down annually against expenditure each year, and that is the data reported.

The data presents a snapshot in time over a period of nine consecutive years, during which time the basis of HESA classification has remained unchanged, thus allowing for year-on-year comparison. This is sufficiently long to see sectoral differences and recent trends, but there care is needed in how those are interpreted. This is especially so where the data shows substantial annual fluctuations. While patterns and change can be observed, there are also serious limitations on how far the causes can be interpreted in a setting where many variables potentially affect those changes and where data is not captured at the disaggregated grant or research award level.

Appendix 1 lists the HESA cost centres and how they have been grouped into the four sectors for the purpose of this report. The sectors are broadly aligned to the discipline groupings for the REF 2021 Panels A to D, also shown for comparison. Some HESA cost centres represent single disciplines, and others discipline clusters. Futhermore, Appendix 1 shows how the HESA cost centres map onto the Academy of Social Sciences' classification of the social sciences, which is also broadly aligned with that of others, including the disciplines included in REF Panel C.

However, there are challenges in some cases where disciplines (and HESA cost centres) are multi-faceted and include substantial research strengths in social science and in another sector. This applies in this report, in particular, to three cost centres that relate directly to medicine and allied health sciences:

- Psychology and behavioural sciences (HESA cost centre 104), which includes much social science in social psychology and behavioural science elements.
- Health and community studies (HESA cost centre 105) which contains substantial social science elements.
- Sports science and leisure studies (HESA cost centre 108) which includes strong social science aspects in sports studies, leisure and tourism studies.

One further challenge arises, with the geography and environmental studies cost centre (124). This is classed within social studies by HESA, as social

sciences in REF 2021, and in the social science sector in this report owing to a predominance of social science. However, this cost centre also includes substantial research in aspects of environmental science (which is included in STEM by both HESA and REF).

This report handles those difficulties in the following ways:

- Sectoral analyses: we use the four sectoral definitions in Appendix 1 which takes into consideration the disciplines and the HESA and REF classifications. This retains the cost centres of psychology and behavioural science, health and community studies, and sports sciences and leisure studies in the M&B sector.
- Discipline level analyses within the social sciences: we differentiate between:
  - the 'core' group of social science disciplines that are wholly or largely social science, and which REF and the Academy of Social Sciences both class as social science, including geography and environmental studies. Archaeology is not included in this group.
  - an 'extended' group of social sciences which includes in addition the data for the whole of psychology and the whole of sport science and leisure studies (for both of which data subsets for the social sciences elements are not available), and the health and community studies cost centre which is a largely social science sub-set of the health sciences.

We recognise that some other disciplines in other sectors also have elements of social sciences, but not to the same extent and are therefore not included in our analysis. This is perhaps most notable in social and economic history, in linguistics and media studies (all of which are classified in the A&H sector).

# Research funding of the social sciences sector



The social sciences (SS) sector in UK universities received a total of  $\pounds$ 571.9 million (m) of research funding in the academic year 2021/22 (Figure 1), up from  $\pounds$ 468.6 m in 2013/14 (adjusted to 2021/22 prices). It compares, in 2021/22, with  $\pounds$ 237.7 m in the arts and humanities (A&H),  $\pounds$ 3.77 billion (bn) in medical and biological sciences (M&B), and  $\pounds$ 2.31 bn in physical sciences, technology, engineering and maths (STEM).



Change in research grant income between 2013/14 and 2021/22 by sector (£000) (adjusted to 2021/22 prices using the HM Treasury GDP indices)

# Figure 1: Change in research grant income between 2013/14 and 2021/22 by sector (£000) (adjusted to 2021/22 prices using the HM Treasury GDP indices).

Real, if modest, growth has occurred in research funding levels across all four sectors over the nine years. The funding differential in monetary (£) terms has, however, substantially widened between M&B/STEM and SS/A&H even though the percentage increases (between 14% and 30%) favoured the less well funded areas (Figure 1). Comparing 2013/14 with 2021/22, core social science funding has risen by £103 m pa; in contrast to an increase of £835 m pa in the biomedical and physical sciences (of which £476 m is in M&B and £359 m in STEM). The social science percentage share of the total has fluctuated between 7.4% and 8.3% while the largest share, of around 55%, has remained in the M&B sector (Figure 2).

There are some good reasons for this including, as often quoted, higher resource costs of research in some areas of medical and physical science owing to the demands of sophisticated laboratory, field and data processing equipment, the space it needs, and the more extensive team structure of much of the research undertaken. However, the social sciences are not without significant infrastructure needs, largely in the provision, linking, analysis and modelling of data, including longitudinal surveys, and in field and community-based research, and they increasingly employ team-based approaches requiring researcher time and technical inputs.

Recent UK research policy has placed considerable emphasis – both financially and rhetorically – on STEM and M&B as drivers of economic growth. In some cases, this has been justified and justifiable, and has often directly or indirectly also involved some social science contributions as part of inter- and multidisciplinary working. Nevertheless, the allocation of funds has become lopsided, undervaluing and under-representing an equivalently rich, textured and ambitious agenda for the many ways social science research and expertise contribute to addressing the UK's economic, social and environmental priorities.



Figure 2: Research grant income by sector - percentage share (adjusted to 2021/22 prices using the HM Treasury GDP indices).

Decisions over funding allocations by large foundations and other charity funders relate directly to the purposes of those organisations.

Details of success rates for funding applications are not available for all sources. However, for 2021/22, <u>the data published by UKRI for competitive</u> research and innovation grants shows the success rates for numbers of awards to be between 24% and 30% across the thematic research councils (Arts and Humanities Research Council, Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, Economic and Social Research Council, Medical Research Council and Natural Environment Research Council) and for awards value to be between 22% and 31%.

The COVID-19 pandemic served to illustrate in real time, in a national and global emergency, the essential role of social science research. For example, in understanding the differing social, economic and cultural contexts within our population and using that to guide messaging around mitigation measures; in predicting, assessing and alerting government to the unequal impacts on sectors of society, including families, children and ethnic minority groups and in different places; in understanding and helping to manage the increased risk of educational inequalities; and in monitoring impacts on businesses of all sizes in real time to inform policy on furlough and other economic support measures for businesses by government and the Bank of England; and much more. The pandemic also served to illustrate the symbiosis between medical and social science research in managing this emergency.

As shown in Figure 3, the increase in funding from the Research Councils (UKRI), accounts for more than two thirds of the monetary increase in research funding for the social sciences between 2019/20 and 2021/22, and at a time when EU funding was falling post Brexit. The role of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is particularly important here, and the success with which social science research, across many disciplines, engaged with the pandemic emergency research funding streams will account for part of this increase.

The pattern of social science research funding over the nine years, across the major funders, falls into three broad groups (Figure 3). By far the single largest source is the Research Councils (£242 m; 42% of total in 2021/22); followed by the UK and EU governments which together account for a further 32%; with all other UK sources, non-EU and EU non-government combined providing approximately 25%.



# Figure 3: Core social science: research grant income by funding source (£000) (adjusted to 2021/22 prices using the HM Treasury GDP indices). X axis scale years from 2013/14 to 2021/22.

Between 2013/14 and 2021/22 the main growth in both percentage (46%) and real (+£76 m pa.) terms has been in Research Council (UKRI) funding. Real increases (36%) in the funding of social sciences over this period also came from UK Charities, from an annual starting point in 2013/14 of £40 m. The decline in social science research funding from the EU Government post 2018 is clear (Figure 3). A fall of approximately 15% was seen from the highs of 2017/18 and 2018/19 to the lows of 2020/21 and 2021/22 when funding in real terms fell below that of 2013/14 (Figure 4). Direct UK Government funding has seen a largely downward trend since 2016/17 too but with an uptick in 2021/22. Worse still, this follows a period of steady decline between 2004/05 and 2012/13 when the value of UK Government funding for social science research in HE halved in real terms.



### Figure 4: Core social science: research grant income by funding source - change from 2013/14 to 2021/22 (adjusted to 2021/22 prices using the HM Treasury GDP indices).

The funding source profiles in both STEM (46% Research Councils/UKRI in 2021/22) and A&H (45% Research Councils/UKRI in 2021/22) are broadly similar to those in social science, albeit with very different monetary (£) sums involved. Only in the case of A&H, the two second tier funders are the EU Government and UK Charities (not UK Government); and in STEM there is less distinction between the second tier funders and the lower funders.

The M&B sector funding profile differs more (Figure 5). Here, UK Charities are the largest single source consistently over the nine-year period, but with a marked dip in the peak pandemic years of 2019/20 and 2020/21 and with some recovery in 2021/22. The Research Councils (UKRI) and UK Government form the second tier, and International (non-EU) sources provide a noticeably higher and rising proportion of total funds compared with the other three sectors. The latter increase is offset by the sustained fall in EU Government funding since 2019.



Figure 5: Medical & biological sciences: research grant income by funding source (£000) (adjusted to 2021/22 prices using the HM Treasury GDP indices). X axis scale years from 2013/14 to 2021/22.

# Research funding of disciplines within the social sciences sector

There are differences in the research funding profiles of the individual HESA cost centres that fall within the social sciences sector. Four dimensions are explored in this section: total annual research income; funding from the Research Councils (UKRI) specifically; research income patterns of change over time; and income per academic staff FTE.

Care needs to be taken in interpreting the documented differences in research funding levels and trajectories as there will be multiple and interacting factors at play and these will vary over time. The differences should not be interpreted simplistically as indicators of the relative success of different disciplines in attracting funding, their levels of research activity or productivity, or their likely impact.

Different disciplines (and sub-disciplines) have different needs for research funding and different opportunities for sourcing funding. The opportunities and amounts available will also change over time, driven by the strategic agendas of the funders. Some disciplines play more readily into short to medium term thematic funding strands in the Research Councils (UKRI), for example, whereas others rely more heavily on open competition in generic grant funding for discovery research. Charitable and trust sources typically have specific foci for their funding in line with their purposes. Competition and success rates will vary between sources and over time. And there will always be those researchers whose needs and desires for additional funding are minimal; their work relying on publicly available sources of data, including the national population census and ESRC-funded longitudinal studies, for example.



Figure 6a: Research grant income by academy discipline (Core social sciences): change from 2013/14 to 2021/22 (adjusted to 2021/22 prices using the HM Treasury GDP indices). (Data in £000's.)

### Total annual research income

Figures 6a ('core' social science) and 6b ('extended' social science) summarise total annual research income in 2013/14 and 2021/22. Of the 'core' social science disciplines, four have shown increases in real terms in research income of more than 35% between 2013/14 and 2021/22. Clearly, these changes are from different income starting points and in HE communities of very different sizes. The disciplines are geography and environmental studies (52% increase), law (50%), politics and international relations (46%) and social work including social policy (37%).



Research grant income by academy discipline (Extended Social Sciences): change from 2013/14 to 2021/22 (adjusted to 2021/22 prices using the HM Treasury GDP indices)

Figure 6b: Research grant income by academy discipline (Extended social sciences): change from 2013/14 to 2021/22 (adjusted to 2021/22 prices using the HM Treasury GDP indices). (Data in the columns is annual research funding in £000's; columns are split with 2013/14 on the left and 2021/22 on the right.)

The two 'core' social sciences that receive the highest levels of research funding – geography and environmental studies, and business and management studies – between them account for approximately one third of the total value of research income reported for the 'core' social sciences. Psychology (39% increase) and sport science and leisure studies (64%) from the 'extended' group of social sciences have also seen substantial increases in research funding.

It should be noted that the data for psychology and geography and environmental studies will be inflated by the inclusion within those disciplines of some M&B and STEM research and funding, respectively, given the multisectoral nature of the disciplines (see Figure 8 for geography).

Almost all the other social science disciplines have seen more modest but none-the-less important increases of between 7% and 17%. The exception in the 'core' social science group is education research which has seen a decline in real terms of approximately 10% over the same period. In the 'extended' group, the social aspects of health sciences research income also decreased,

#### by more than 30%.

The irony will not be lost that the areas experiencing university research funding decline in real terms are education and public health research; both are among the most important and challenging issues for the UK Government and both health and education are massive consumers of public expenditure. Further investigation is recommended in both cases to understand what lies behind these research funding changes. We look forward to a forthcoming report by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) on education research funding, later in 2024.



### Figure 7: Core social sciences percentage share of 2021/22 research grant income by academy discipline.

In summary, Figure 7 visualises the proportions of total 'core' social science research funding by HESA cost centre, for 2021/22 data.

### **Research Council (UKRI) funding**

As UKRI research funding constitutes the largest single source for the social sciences, it is worth unpacking that a little. Figure 8 illustrates the contributions of funding gained from the different Research Councils, for the 'core' social science disciplines as totals over the seven-year period from 2015/16 (when disaggregated RCUK/UKRI data was first made available) to 2021/22.

The vital role that ESRC plays in underpinning the UKRI funding across all social science disciplines is evident. The other UKRI research councils also contribute to funding in many of the social sciences disciplines; most notably the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) in business and management and in architecture, built environment and planning cost centres, and NERC in geography and environmental studies. The latter discipline group has the most wide-ranging funding from across UKRI, and a stable pattern over the study period (Figure 9). Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funding is present across all the social science cost centres in proportions broadly similar to that deriving from 'Research Councils: other'. This generic category includes income from the UKRI's Future Leaders Fellowship scheme, and research funding from The Royal Society, British Academy and The Royal Society of Edinburgh.



Figure 8: Research Council (UKRI) funding totals for core social sciences, 2015/16 to 2021/22. (Key to UKRI Research Councils: AHRC Arts & Humanities; BBSRC Biotechnology & Biological Sciences; EPSRC Engineering & Physical Sciences; ESRC Economic & Social; MRC Medical; NERC Natural Environment; STFC Science & Technology Facilities.)



### Figure 9: Research funding for geography and environmental studies from the Research Councils (RCUK/UKRI).

### Research funding change over time

The patterns of change in research income over the nine years by discipline are depicted in Figure 10. The most notable trajectory of increase, proportionally and in monetary terms, is in geography and environmental studies. Education and sociology have been the most volatile and variable year on year. Architecture, the built environment and planning has seen a slow but steady decline since 2018/19, unlike most other disciplines. Education stands out as receiving less research funding in real terms in 2021/22 than in 2013/14.

At the more granular discipline level, the patterns of change in research grant funding for business and management is fairly typical of several social science disciplines (Figure 11 and Table 2), and broadly in line with the pattern of research grant funding for the social sciences as a whole. Research Council (RCUK) income rose markedly from 2018/19, reflecting enhanced investment in particular from ESRC; EU Government funding has unsurprisingly declined from 2019/20; and the other sources are broadly flat lined in real terms, including UK Government.



Figure 10: Research grant income by academy discipline (core social sciences) (£000) (adjusted to 2021/22 prices using the HM Treasury GDP indices). X axis scale years from 2013/14 to 2021/22.



Figure 11: Business & management: Research grant income by funding source (£000) (adjusted to 2021/22 prices using the HM Treasury GDP indices).

	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Research councils	22,367	20,430	18,747	19,389	20,498	21,723	25,801	30,571	34,080
UK Government	15,260	15,175	17,107	16,128	17,051	16,795	16,032	15,237	15,300
EU Government	15,565	17,062	15,257	18,045	17,708	19,422	19,178	15,910	15,976
UK Charities	4,209	6,577	5,799	5,548	6,277	4,447	3,896	3,619	4,374
Non-EU	3,623	4,510	4,654	5,520	5,705	5,228	4,648	3,258	3,041
UK Industry	7,520	7,242	8,113	8,509	9,242	8,802	8,529	7,146	7,986
EU Other	3,051	2,822	1,908	2,472	2,586	2,151	3,163	2,233	2,422
UK Other	3,243	1,796	1,819	1,470	1,581	1,387	1,347	1,976	1,480

Table 2: Business and management: research grant income by funding source (£000) (adjusted to 2021/22 prices using the HM Treasury GDP indices).



### Figure 12: Social work (including social policy): Research grant income by funding source (£000) (adjusted to 2021/22 prices using the HM Treasury GDP indices).

In contrast, social work and social policy (Figure 12) is the only 'core' social science in which direct UK Government research funding generally has been greater than that from the Research Councils (UKRI). It is also one of the few disciplines in which UK Government funding has been on an overall upward trend over the nine years, although in the last two years it is being approximately matched by Research Council (UKRI) grant funding.

Education research grant funding, in Figure 13, shows a stark divergence between Research Council (UKRI) and direct UK Government funding sources, with the latter falling fairly steadily in value by a third in real terms over the nine years. Much less dramatic, but none-the-less important, are declines in grant income from three of the other funding sources. The only notable increase in grant funding over the period has been from the Research Councils (UKRI).



### Figure 13: Education (including teacher training and continuing education): Research grant income by funding source (£000) (adjusted to 2021/22 prices using the HM Treasury GDP indices).

Finally, from the HESA data the most extreme example of falling research grant revenues in the (extended) social sciences comes from the social health sciences (Figure 14 and Table 3). It illustrates the risks that arise when research grant funding is heavily dependent on a single major source, in this case the UK Government. A 50% drop in real terms in UK Government grant funding occurred steadily between the peak in 2014/15 and 2021/22. We recommend this is further explored by the discipline community.



Figure 14: Health sciences (social): Research grant income by funding source (£000) (adjusted to 2021/22 prices using the HM Treasury GDP indices).

	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Research councils	7,185	9,189	9,271	4,867	5,215	5,772	3,818	4,473	5,841
UK Government	50,246	67,105	61,238	62,186	47,742	45,229	35,780	36,322	33,070
EU Government	4,132	6,297	4,448	4,101	2,894	3,642	2,240	1,571	1,137
UK Charities	7,210	8,410	7,847	7,070	5,878	7,376	5,339	5,624	4,925
Non-EU	951	1,368	1,674	1,012	917	1,147	1,487	1,943	2,017
UK Industry	1,113	1,144	3,295	1,159	699	1,035	708	999	1,155
EU Other	309	588	732	511	316	412	505	1,485	800
UK Other	1,650	1,352	1,108	1,176	284	430	407	258	355

Table 3: Health sciences (social): research grant income by funding source (£000) (adjusted to 2021/22 prices using the HM Treasury GDP indices).

### Research grant income per academic staff FTE

Taking account of the size of the research staff pool within each of the disciplines provides some interesting contrasts (Figure 15 and Table 4). This analysis uses HESA data of FTE equivalent numbers of academic staff employed on 'research and teaching' contracts in each of the cost centres in each year to provide basic averages.

Great care must be taken with average data in a setting where the distribution of grant awards across the academic discipline populations are not known but will be far from even and where the value of awards tends to be highly skewed. The data should thus be treated as nothing more than indicative.

Anthropology and development studies exemplify a discipline cluster with a relatively small FTE academic staff and relatively modest total research income that has sustained relatively high levels of average research funding per FTE of  $\pounds 65k$  (2021/22) and  $\pounds 71k$  (2013/14) in real terms.

While the total value of research funding in education fell by about 10% in real terms between 2013/14 and 2021/22 (Figure 6a), the average per academic staff FTE remained broadly similar in both years at around £13.5k per annum. The implication is a decline in academic staff numbers over this period, and that can be seen in Figure 16.

Sociology had an increase in research income of 16% between 2013/14 and 2021/22, but a decline in average income per FTE of close to 10% from approximately £30k to £27k owing in part to increasing academic staff FTE numbers (Figure 16).

The greatest percentage increases in average research income per FTE were in the two disciplines with the smallest total research grant funding, namely law (to £9k average per FTE in 2021/22) and sports and leisure studies (to £11k average per FTE). In terms of the larger disciplines, social work and social policy saw a 30% increase to £38k average per FTE in 2021/22; and geography and environmental studies saw a 28% increase to £70k average per FTE in 2021/22.

The nature of change in both academic staff FTE numbers and average research income per FTE, comparing 2013/14 with 2021/22 in real terms, and for all disciplines is shown in Figure 16. One of the most marked contrasts between proportional changes in staff FTE numbers and research income per

FTE is between social work (including social policy), and both sociology (including criminology) and anthropology (including development studies). In the first case there was a small proportional increase in staff and a high proportional increase in research income per FTE. In the other two, relatively high proportional increases in staff accompanied a circa 10% fall in real terms in average research income per staff FTE.



Figure 15: Research grant income (£000) per academic staff FTE by academy discipline (extended social sciences): change from 2013/14 to 2021/22 (adjusted to 2021/22 prices using the HM Treasury GDP indices).

	2013/14	2021/22	% change
Anthropology (including development studies)	70.7	64.7	-8.6%
Architecture & built environment (including planning)	25	25.5	2.1%
Business & management	8.6	8.4	-2.6%
Economics & econometrics	24.5	26.5	8.4%
Education (including teacher training and continuing education)	13.6	13.4	-1.5%
Geography & environmental studies	54.8	70.2	28.2%
Health sciences (social)	66.1	53	-19.8%
Law	6.8	8.9	30.3%
Politics & international relations	22.6	26.3	16.3%
Psychology (all)	30.2	31.8	5.5%
Social work (including social policy)	29.2	38	30.0%
Sociology	30.2	27.3	-9.7%
Sport studies & leisure studies (including tourism)	7.8	11.3	45.9%

Table 4: Research grant income (£000) per academic staff FTE bydiscipline (extended social sciences): change from 2013/14 to 2021/22(adjusted to 2021/22 prices).



### Figure 16: Percentage changes in staff FTE numbers and average research income per FTE, between 2013/14 and 2021/22, by discipline(s).

Delving a little deeper, the comparisons of data for Russell Group institutions and Non-Russell Group institutions over the same time interval, are seen in Figure 17 and Table 5.

The differentiation into three broad groups of 'core' social science disciplines becomes clearer in the analysis by FTE across Russell Group institutions. The anthropology, geography, and social work and policy clusters stand out as the highest research income generators per FTE staff member (>£84k pa in 2021/22). Architecture, economics, education, politics and sociology clusters all fall into a broadly defined mid-level of research income generation per FTE staff member (£36k - £56k pa in 2021/22). Business and management, and law comprise the lowest group (£15k - £17k per FTE pa in 2021/22).

The percentage change data is provided for information however it needs very careful handling as relatively small value changes on low-income levels can appear as high percentage change and vice versa. Law is a good example of this where a real value increase of £2k per FTE in the Russell Group institutions represents a 13% change, whereas a similar real value increase in the Non-Russell Group represents a 65% change.



Figure 17: Research grant income (£000) per academic staff FTE by academy discipline (core social sciences): change from 2013/14 to 2021/22 Russell Group vs Non Russell Group (adjusted to 2021/22 prices using the HM Treasury GDP indices).

On the following page:

Table 5: Russell Group and Non-Russell Group research grant income (£000) per academic staff FTE by academy discipline (core social sciences): change from 2013/14 to 2021/22 (adjusted to 2021/22 prices using the HM Treasury GDP indices).

		2013/14	2021/22	% change
Russell Group	Anthropology (including development studies)	90.8	84.6	-6.8%
	Architecture & built environment (including planning)	53.4	49.8	-6.7%
	Business & management	19.0	16.3	-14.3%
	Economics & econometrics	34.9	36.0	3.1%
	Education (including teacher training and continuing education)	42.6	38.5	-9.6%
	Geography & geospatial (including environmental studies)	73.3	95.9	30.8%
	Law	13.6	15.4	13.1%
	Politics & international relations	32.3	39.9	23.3%
	Social work (including social policy)	82.0	86.5	5.5%
	Sociology	57.0	56.0	-1.8%
	Average across all subjects and all RG institutions	38.0	39.3	3.3%
Non- Russell	Anthropology (including development studies)	29.9	34.1	13.9%
Group	Architecture & built environment (including planning)	15.6	15.7	0.8%
	Business & management	6.0	6.3	4.3%
	Economics & econometrics	14.9	17.4	16.8%
	Education (including teacher training and continuing education)	3.4	5.3	57.3%
	Geography & geospatial (including environmental studies)	32.2	39.3	22.0%
	Law	3.1	5.2	65.1%
	Politics & international relations	12.4	10.3	-17.1%
	Social work (including social policy)	15.1	22.4	48.3%
	Sociology	20.6	15.4	-25.5%
	Average across all subjects and all Non-RG institutions	9.0	10.3	14.0%

# Research impact funding in the social sciences



An <u>analysis of the Impact Case Study (ICS) dataset</u>, commissioned by the British Academy in association with the Academy of Social Sciences, summarised funding sources for the research underpinning the impacts in 2,146 of the social science case studies.



### Figure 18: The citation frequency of funding sources for the research underpinning REF 2021 Impact Case Studies in social science.

71% cited one or more funding sources for the underpinning research, drawing on a mix of direct government(s) sources, research council, charitable and commercial R&D funding. The number of ICS citations for the most frequently cited funders is presented in Figure 18. An <u>interactive dashboard</u> is available for further interrogation of the data.

For the remaining 29% that cited no funding sources, in many cases the underpinning research will have received some support, directly or indirectly, through allocations of QR funds to HE institutions by Research England (UKRI), arising from the research assessment outcomes. In addition, there are some areas of research in the social sciences (as indeed there are in other sectors too) where additional external research funding is neither sought nor necessary.

# Conclusion



This report is, we hope, of use to the research community, to research funders and to governments. We see it as important in three ways.

Firstly, in sharing knowledge about the quantum, distribution and change over time of research funding for the sector as a whole and across disciplines and discipline clusters within it.

Secondly, in acting as a reference study for the documentation of change in the future, and in identifying areas of particular concern that the Academy's learned society members may wish to follow up on for 'their' disciplines.

Thirdly, and most importantly, it raises questions about what the UK wants from its social science sector. The funding differential in real terms between social science research and both M&B and STEM sector funding has grown ever more wide at the same time as social science research and impact has performed better than ever and the need for it is greater than ever.

UK social science is a world leader and has celebrated a broad and diverse range of real-world impacts. The demand by government for up-to-date social science research knowledge and its applications is evident from across government. There are many serious and well-documented human-facing challenges confronting the UK and the world, many of which require multidisciplinary research and implementation that include a breadth of social sciences. Some of these are best placed to be led by the social sciences.

We urge the UK Government and UKRI, as the major research funders, to review the funding of social science research with a view to narrowing the funding gap with the 'sciences'. And in so doing to release more of the social science sector's potential to contribute to the social, economic and environmental well-being in the UK and beyond and help understand and address many of the challenges we face at local, regional, devolved nations and UK-wide levels.





### Appendix 1: Classifications of social sciences

HESA cost centre mapping to sectors in this report	AcSS classific scier	ation of social nces	REF 2021 Panel / UoA
Medical & biological sciences (M&B)			
101 Clinical medicine			A / 1
102 Clinical dentistry			A / 1
103 Nursing & allied health professions			A / 3
104 Psychology & behavioural sciences	Social psychology	Behavioural science	A / 4
105 Health & community studies	Social hea	Ith studies	A/2
106 Anatomy & physiology			A/3
107 Pharmacy & pharmacology			A / 3
108 Sports science & leisure studies	Leisure & tou	irism studies	C / 24
109 Veterinary science			A / 6
110 Agriculture, forestry & food science			A / 6
112 Biosciences			A / 5
Science, technology, engineering & m	aths (STEM)		
111 Earth, marine & environmental sciences			В/7
113 Chemistry			B / 8
114 Physics			В/9
115 General engineering			B / 12

### (Classifications of social sciences continued)

116 Chemical engineering			B / 12
117 Mineral, metallurgy & materials engineering			B / 12
118 Civil engineering			B / 12
119 Electrical, electronic & computer engineering			B / 12
120 Mechanical, aero & production engineering			B / 12
121 IT, systems sciences & computer software engineering			B / 11
122 Mathematics	Social s	B / 10	
Social sciences (SS)			
123 Architecture, built environment & planning	Architecture & built environment	Planning	C / 13
124 Geography & environmental studies	Geography	Environmental studies	C / 14
127 Anthropology & development studies	Anthropology	Development studies	C / 22
128 Politics & international studies	Politics	International relations	C / 19
129 Economics & econometrics	Economics	Econometrics	C / 16
130 Law	La	C / 18	
131 Social work & social policy	Social work	Social policy	C / 20
132 Sociology	Sociology	Criminology	C / 21

### (Classifications of social sciences continued)

133 Business & management studies	Business & management	Finance & accounting	C / 17
134 Catering & hospitality management	Included in abo foc	C / 17	
135 Education	Educ	ation	C / 23
136 Continuing education	Included in above (not an AcSS focus)		C / 23
	Social research methods Social data		
Arts & humanities (A&H)	·		·
125 Area studies			D / 25
126 Archaeology			C / 15
137 Modern languages			D / 26
138 English language & literature	Lingu	D / 27	
139 History	Social & eco	nomic history	D / 28
140 Classics			D / 29
141 Philosophy			D / 30
142 Theology & religious studies			D / 31
143 Art & design		D / 32	
144 Music, dance, drama & performing arts		D / 33	
145 Media studies			D / 34

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The Academy of Social Sciences is the national academy of academics, practitioners and learned societies in the social sciences. The sector's leading independent voice in the UK, we champion the vital role social sciences play in education, governments and business.

The social sciences include: anthropology; business, finance & management; criminology; development studies; economics; economic & social history; education; geography; law; linguistics; planning; politics; regional studies; sociology; social policy; social psychology & health sciences; social statistics & methodologies; tourism and leisure studies.