

UK social science in a time of change

Update September 2021

Context

UK social science – and the whole of UK higher education (HE) – is going through a period of unprecedented change, challenge and opportunity. Two major external shocks, Covid-19 and leaving the EU, are already having significant impacts on the sector. In addition, the funding landscape has been transformed in recent years, with increasing emphasis on student fees and, in particular, international students, accompanied by reduced funding from government. The HE sector currently awaits the Government's response to the Augur review with its recommendations of changes to the fees regime. In 2020 and 2021 intakes there has been an influx of home students entering HE arising from short term changes to the marking of A Levels. At the same time, EU student numbers have fallen substantially. Greater emphasis is being placed on teaching excellence, knowledge exchange, employability, and the utility of higher education institutions (HEIs) in regional development and research beyond the academy. New, issue driven, research funding streams have emerged, while recent policy shifts have reduced others.

There are many indicators that UK social science teaching, research and research impact have thrived over the past fifteen to twenty years – for instance in student numbers, world university rankings, Horizon 2020, REF2014 and several ESRC reviews of UK social science disciplines. In addition, it is well known the social science student income cross-subsidises the STEM disciplines in many HEIs. But what of the future in this context of rapid and unprecedented drivers of change?

Aims

The aim of the 'Social Sciences in a Time of Change' project is to provide early indications in response to this question, reporting in mid 2022. More specifically, the aim is to generate 'real time' evidence-based insight and understanding of the emerging impacts – both positive and negative - of the contemporary situation, 2020 to 2022, on the social sciences across the UK HE sector. Further, the aim is to understand HEI's short term planning responses and, where available, indications of strategic responses to these circumstances, particularly with respect to the social sciences.

The research will examine student numbers, origins and income; student recruitment strategies; staff numbers and departments, including any organisational restructuring; pressures on staff and approaches to managing those (including staff welfare, gender and Early Career Researcher/PhD student issues); constraints/opportunities for faculties, departments and SS research centres; and research income. If resources allow, impacts on specific disciplines will be noted. Attention will be paid different parts of the sector (Russell Group/pre-1992/post-1992 HEIs) and to differing policy settings across the countries of the UK. The project team will produce a research report at the end of March 2022 and this will be used as the basis for knowledge exchange activities in the UK and internationally.

Team

The project is a collaboration between the Academy of Social Sciences (Co-PI: Dr Rita Gardner, CEO) and the University of Lancaster (Co-PI: Professor Tony McEnery), and with the support of Sharon Witherspoon (Head of Policy, AcSS) and a Research Officer. It is funded by an ESRC Grant Award. The Academy is taking the lead in implementation.

Methods

The research will follow a mixed-methods design and will draw on: in-depth qualitative interviews with social sciences leaders and managers in around 25 UK HEIs, a questionnaire survey across the sector, analysis of secondary data from HESA, ongoing literature review and monitoring, and ongoing dialogue with Learned societies and other stakeholders.

Delivery

The project's advisory board is drawn from senior figures in higher education and the ESRC. A detailed project plan (including information about the project context, research design, research methods and plan) was developed between mid October 202-mid January 2021. In depth qualitative research was planned and conducted between February and July 2021. It involved more than 100 individuals from 25 HEIs in over 30 separate interviews and has provided a rich resource of information.

The questionnaire survey, which will aim for coverage of all HEIs active in the social sciences, is planned for Autumn 2021, together with follow us focus group meetings of those involved in the qualitative interviews. Secondary data analysis, reporting and knowledge exchange will largely take place in 2022.

	2020	2021			2022		
	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-June	July-Sept	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-June
Project set-up	X						
Literature review and monitoring	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Qualitative (phase 1)		X	X	X			
Secondary data analysis		X				X	
Qualitative (phase 2)					X		
Quantitative survey				X	X		
Reporting						X	
Knowledge exchange							X

Table 1. Project plan

Contact

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