

UK social science in a time of change Summary November 2021

Background

UK social science – and the whole of UK higher education (HE) – is going through a period of unprecedented change, challenge and opportunity. Two major recent external shocks – Covid-19 and the vote to leave the EU – are likely to have significant impacts, potentially positive as well as negative. The funding landscape has also been transformed in recent years, with increasing emphasis on student fees and – in particular – international students, accompanied by reduced funding from government. In addition, HE policy is under review with announcements expected at some point in response to the Augar review, plus an ever greater emphasis on teaching excellence, employability, and the utility of higher education institutions (HEIs) 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 change?

Aims

The aim of the Health of Social Science project is to provide early indications in response to this question, in Spring of 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 on the social sciences across the UK HE sector. Further the aim is to understand HEI’s planning and, where possible, early strategic responses to these circumstances, particularly with respect to the social sciences.

In broad terms, the research is addressing issues such as: student numbers and income; student recruitment strategies; new constraints/opportunities for faculties, departments and SS research centres; staffing levels, pressures and strategies (including, staff welfare, gender and Early Career Researcher/PhD student issues); and research landscape, activity and income. Attention will be paid different parts of the sector (e.g. Russell Group/pre-1992/post-1992 HEIs) and to scenarios across the countries of the UK. The project team will produce a research report in Spring 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: Rita Gardner, CEO) and the University of Lancaster (Co-PI: Professor Tony McEnergy) and is funded by an ESRC Grant Award. The Academy is taking the lead in implementation, with

the research having been carried out in the first phase by Dr Kevin Burchell, and now in the second phase by Dr David Vernon, with additional support from Sharon Witherspoon (AcSS Head of Policy).

Methods

The research is following a mixed-methods design and draws on: two phases of in-depth qualitative interviews with senior managers and social science 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

A detailed project plan (including information about the project context, research design, research methods and plan) was developed between October-December 2020 together with the initial literature and policy context review. The project plan was supported at a productive meeting with the project Advisory Board (drawn from across the sector and the ESRC) at the start of December 2020.

The main phase of in-depth qualitative interviews took place between April and early June 2021. It provided a very rich source of data, was written up, and reviewed favourably by the Advisory Board in July. The research was put on hold temporarily between September and November 2021 to allow for the appointment of a new research officer. The questionnaire survey is being deployed over December 2021 and January 2022, to all HEIs with a social science presence. Unfortunately, we could not afford to wait any longer for the promised Whitehall response to the Augar review.

The remaining research, analysis and reporting will take place up until mid April 2022, thereby allowing the inclusion of HESA data for academic year 2020/21. April-June 2022 will be used for UK and international knowledge exchange activities. See Table 1.

	2020	2021				2022	
	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-June	July-Sept	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun
Project set-up	X						
Literature review and monitoring	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			X		X	
Knowledge exchange		X		X			X

Table 1. Project plan

Contact

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