

# Exploding the ivory tower myth

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When people think about how academia links with external organisations they often think in terms of commercialisation of research. But the results of a large-scale survey of academics across all disciplines in every UK university, and a parallel survey of all sectors of UK business, tell a very different story.

The surveys were carried out by the Centre for Business Research (CBR) at Cambridge Judge [Business School](#) as part of a research initiative funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the respective higher education funding councils of England, Scotland, Wales and [Northern Ireland](#).

The results were finalized last year and have now been interrogated in greater detail, and supported by a set of detailed case studies, for the arts and humanities – a group of disciplines conventionally given little

emphasis in relation to discussions of the socio-economic impact of University activity.

A recently published report of this latest research, which was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, explodes some of the myths surrounding the alleged ivory tower isolation of university [academics](#) to reveal the wide, but often hidden, impact of universities outside of academia. They also show the way in which Universities can act as a 'public space' within which a variety of initially informal interactions can develop into a broad spectrum of fruitful interactions with the public, private and third sectors.

## **UK-wide survey of all academics**

Over 22,000 academics responded to the survey – the largest survey in the world to date to cover academic involvement with external organisations – as well as over 2,500 businesses of all sectors and sizes. The results permit a detailed mapping of the patterns of interactions of academics with external organisations in the public, private and community sectors, together with an in-depth examination of private sector business views of their relationships with academics.

For the UK academic community as a whole, the survey results make it very plain that commercialisation activities in the sense of licensing, patenting or spin-out companies are a very small part of the overall knowledge exchange spectrum.

Compared with 5% and 7% of UK academics, respectively, who report having licensed research or are carrying out patenting activity, over 30% report being involved in standard-setting forums with external organisations or are directly employed in employee training and student placement with external organisations. Nearly 90% attend events such as conferences involving external organisations. These people-related

activities dwarf knowledge exchange through direct commercialisation.

In addition, problem-solving activities such as involvement in research consortia, prototyping, testing and, in particular, the provision of informal advice, are between five and 10 times more important than direct commercialisation. Finally, around a third of academics are involved in lectures for the community, school projects and the provision of a wide variety of public exhibitions and arts activities for the community.

The academic survey also revealed that the external organisations involved in these academic interactions extended beyond the private sector to include a rich set of interactions with the public sector, and with a wide range of charitable community and local and regional organisations.

In terms of the constraints on knowledge exchange between the private sector and [academia](#), the conventional wisdom that constraints are caused by cultural differences, conflict over intellectual property and differences in time periods over which research should be carried out is not supported by evidence. Instead, the principle constraint reported by businesses was their own internal capacity to manage academic relationships effectively. From the academics' point of view, it is the pressure of time and the need to manage pressures to combine external relationships (which were frequently seen to be positively related to research and teaching activities) with the demands of career prospects (which are dominated by academic publication).

## **Arts and humanities**

The overall survey includes 3,650 responses from academics in fields within the scope of the Arts and Humanities Research Council, including English, linguistics and modern languages, classics, history, philosophy,

architecture, cultural studies, and the creative arts and media.

An analysis of patenting and licensing reveals that this is, with the exception of the creative arts and media, a relatively low level of activity for these academics. However, once we move beyond this narrow perspective to include knowledge exchange that spans people-based, problem-solving and community-orientated activities, the arts and humanities display as rich and diverse a set of connections as other disciplines, and a particularly wide-range of third sector and community interactions.

Academics from the arts and humanities therefore emerge as highly connected with the UK economy and society. Moreover, these interactions are regarded by the academics involved as strongly supportive of scholarship and represent a two-way complementary interaction with external organisations.

The notion therefore that knowledge exchange is an activity driven solely by commercial and pecuniary interests is mis-founded – for most academics in the arts and humanities, the main impact of connecting with others is complementary to their research and their teaching.

Even within a narrow commercialisation perspective, a disaggregation of arts and humanities to distinguish creative arts and media from other humanities reveals that the former displays connection characteristics as deep as other disciplines and with considerable private sector and commercial interactions.

The business survey responses also reveal a pattern of interactions with academics which spans all disciplines and stretches beyond patenting and licensing. Businesses frequently use multiple disciplinary sources including arts and humanities to address a wide range of activities spanning marketing and organisational change and which go beyond a

focus on technology development.

## University as a public space

Many academics from the arts and humanities (and those from other [disciplines](#)) do not connect with external organisations because it is not considered necessary for their research or teaching. Two striking findings of the research in this respect are that the connections which are made are most frequently initiated by the external organisations that academics partner and second that they are not initially instigated via Technology Transfer Offices.

For knowledge exchange to be effective and provide benefits to all partners, the development of mutual understanding and management of expectations is crucial. Where there are areas where improved connectivity would both support academic pursuits and wider social and economic objectives, knowledge exchange can therefore be best improved by mechanisms that can support informal interaction, the discovery of mutual interests and the subsequent development and management of relationships.

Maintaining a strong pattern of knowledge exchange activities is closely connected to what may be termed the 'public space' role of universities; a forum in which a wide variety of individuals and organisations can interact and develop relationships. Some of these relationships may lead to a commercial and contractual stage, but their development depends on the ability to connect in a way that is, at least initially, not driven by strictly instrumental and commercial needs. Universities provide an environment to nurture interactions and potential links from which a wide variety of other connections, including strictly commercial ones, may develop.

**More information:** A report on the full academic survey can be found

at [www.cbr.cam.ac.uk/pdf/AcademicSurveyReport.pdf](http://www.cbr.cam.ac.uk/pdf/AcademicSurveyReport.pdf) ; Hidden Connections: Knowledge Exchange between the Arts and Humanities and the Private, Public and Third Sectors by Alan Hughes, Michael Kitson, Jocelyn Probert, Anna Bullock and Isobel Milner was published by the AHRC and CBR in May 2011.

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