

The role of the SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities & the Arts for People and the Economy) subjects in knowledge exchange

Following publication of the first iteration of Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) results in Spring 2021, the British Academy released its report 'Knowledge Exchange in the SHAPE disciplines' (the Report) in June 2021 which presented a diverse range of case studies showing that knowledge exchange in SHAPE disciplines yields significant social, economic and cultural benefits.

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As well as showcasing innovative knowledge exchange projects (including a collaboration between Browne Jacobson and the University of Nottingham), the report also suggests possible developments for future iterations of the KEF. These include extending the assessment categories to capture more activities (e.g. by measuring explicitly how SHAPE disciplines work with policy makers, engaging with schools and how the insights from SHAPE can help drive inclusion and equality).

What are the SHAPE subjects?

Much is written about STEM(M) (science, technology, engineering, mathematics, manufacturing) subjects and we probably all know which subjects are STEM(M) subjects but may be less familiar with the SHAPE subjects. They include a diverse range of subjects including Business and Management, Geography and Environmental Studies, Law, History and Archaeology and Languages, Linguistics and Classics and the Report describes them as '...subjects that help us understand ourselves, others and the human world around us. They provide us with the methods and forms of expression we need to build better, deeper, more colourful and more valuable lives for all.'

What is knowledge exchange?

The KEF categorises different types of knowledge exchange activities in a framework of seven perspectives. These perspectives capture just some of the ways that the knowledge and skills within universities can be used by wider society and how wider society can inform university education and research. The seven perspectives are:

1. Research Partnerships (with non-academic partners)
2. Working with Business
3. Working with the Public and Third Sector
4. Skills, Enterprise and Entrepreneurship
5. Local Growth and Regeneration
6. Intellectual Property and Commercialisation

7. Public and Community Engagement

The projects showcased in the Report are categorised across these seven perspectives with some projects including several of the KEF perspectives.

Our collaboration with the University of Nottingham

We collaborated with the University of Nottingham to understand and improve the readability and comprehension of insurance policies. This followed a research study by linguistics experts in the School of English at the University of Nottingham which discovered that eight out of 10 policyholders in the UK found their insurance contracts too complex to understand.

Browne Jacobson commissioned a study from experts at the University using multiple methods, including cutting-edge eye-tracking technology. The study found that most policy wording was only comprehensible to those educated to undergraduate level but, with redrafting, complex policies could be made coherent to most individuals with lower secondary education. These improvements in readability and understanding increased the percentage of the UK adult population who could understand their policies from 13.4% to 89%, representing an extra 40.4 million people across the UK.

We worked together to explore what changes could make a policy document easier to understand and what might impede that understanding. These findings have been shared across the insurance industry in order to improve practice and accessibility. Since releasing the findings of the academic study we have worked with a number of insurance market participants to significantly improve the readability of the wordings, including by incorporating linguistic analysis by the university as part of our services.

Conclusion

This is a very timely report that highlights the potential for knowledge exchange activities to be developed in the SHAPE subjects in perhaps unexpected and exciting ways.

When you look at these opportunities with an eye to the future you can see a breadth of opportunity for universities to get involved. For example, two areas we have seen recently relate to health care and how it will develop to take into account social needs of society by working on innovation and research and how central government bodies have been studying and researching financial matters to provide the appropriate support for society; two areas which the pandemic has really shone a light on.

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