Abstract

In recent years the British government has repeated its calls for improved transfer of research knowledge and for greater engagement of researchers with practitioners and the public. This echoes calls from Burawoy and others, in the USA and elsewhere, for greater engagement by social sciences. In the UK the national research councils have raised their investment in knowledge transfer activities, six 'beacons for public engagement' have been set up, and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has enhanced its work in this field. In this context, the UK Academy of Social Sciences (AcSS), which includes 35 learned societies and some 550 academicians, resolved in 2007 to undertake a study of the role of learned societies in membership of the AcSS in promoting knowledge transfer and public engagement. This article outlines how the study was undertaken, the discussions around key terms, and the principal findings which were published in 2008 in a volume entitled *Developing Dialogue*. The article reports on the activities, capabilities, contributions and weaknesses and strengths of the learned societies that were studied. The Research Assessment Exercise, conducted in the UK in 2007–08, was found to have acted as a significant impediment to such work. The paper outlines six key points arising from the research, noting the variety of learned societies and their activities, the need for greater investment and training, and the leadership role that the Academy itself could play with increased resources. The study found that there is a long way to go before many practitioners, policy makers and members of the public are aware and engaged with much of the work and research in the social sciences in Britain.

Developing Greater Dialogue

Knowledge Transfer, Public Engagement and Learned Societies in the Social Sciences

John Benyon

Institute of Lifelong Learning, University of Leicester and Chair of the College of Learned Societies, Academy of Social Sciences

The call for engagement

On 16 January 2008 John Denham, the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, delivered a speech on 'Science and Society' (DIUS, 2008a). In this speech, Mr Denham reflected on the 'Two Cultures' lecture of C.P. Snow given in 1959, nearly 50 years' earlier. He said that today 'the importance of scientific understanding, of engagement across society – and not just among the well-educated – has never been greater'.

From a rather different perspective, social scientists such as Michael Burawoy (2005) have advocated greater engagement between the social sciences and the public. He calls for increased status and support for 'public sociology', which he contrasts with three other types of sociology – policy, professional, and critical sociology. Burawoy believes that the social sciences should engage different publics in different ways seeking to change the world and 'making public issues out of private troubles' (Burawoy 2005, p. 261).

On various occasions in recent years the United Kingdom government has pledged its commitment to make greater use of research findings in the development of 'evidence-based' public policy, although it has not always been apparent that this has been the case. The government has also called for greater transfer of research knowledge and placed an increasing priority on the engagement of researchers with

employers (Lambert 2003) and with the wider public. These calls have come from ministers and in statements and policies from, for example, the Treasury as well as the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), and from government bodies in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

In 2006, the Warry Report, entitled *Increasing the Economic Impact of the Research Councils*, called for improved knowledge transfer and challenged the research councils to foster more interaction between researchers and users of their research. Since then they have reviewed and harmonised their support schemes, sought new partnerships with other organisations, and increased their resources and staff for knowledge transfer activities (Research Councils UK, 2007).

On public engagement, Dr Ian Pearson, who was then Science Minister, initiated work to develop a ‘refreshed approach’ to government science and society policy. In November 2007 the minister proposed the following as a vision (DIUS, 2008a, p. 5): *A society that is excited about science, values its importance to economic and social well-being, feels confident in its use, and supports a representative, well-qualified scientific workforce.*

In January 2008 funding was announced for six university-based ‘Beacons for Public Engagement’ as collaborative centres ‘to help support, recognise, reward and build capacity for public engagement work across the UK.’ The Beacons’ prospectus (Beacons for Public Engagement 2008) included a statement by Professor David Eastwood, Chief Executive of the Higher Education Funding Council, which said ‘Listening to and involving the public is fundamentally important to the work of higher education and society.’

In keeping with these calls, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has committed itself to an enhancement of both its knowledge transfer and its public engagement work. The key elements of its 2007 Knowledge Transfer and Economic Impact Strategy are threefold: to create and support impact through knowledge exchange, people transfer and infrastructure; to play a leadership role within the social science community; and to communicate the impact of the social sciences. Regarding public engagement, its Delivery Plan 2008–2011 states that it will extend its science in society activities with a continuing emphasis on promoting research

careers; strengthening the evidence base on engaging with the public; and widening the range of activities for the general public, especially young people.

[BOX 1 about here]

Developing the research proposal

It was in this context that the Academy of Social Sciences resolved to study the issues in greater detail and to investigate the role of learned societies in the social sciences in promoting knowledge transfer and public engagement. In 2007 the Academy had 32 learned societies in membership. Many of them were already involved in this sort of work but there seemed to be considerable variation between them in what they did. Little was known of a systematic nature and there did not appear to be good communication between the societies, or with the Academy itself or the ESRC. There seemed to be a lot of scope for more collaboration and greater sharing of ideas and good practice.

These matters were discussed in the College of Learned Societies and elsewhere within the Academy and it was agreed that it would be desirable to have more information. The proposal that took shape was quite an ambitious project to collect information on a raft of different aspects of learned societies in the social sciences in the United Kingdom.

The original idea was for a 30-month project that would collect comparative data from the different learned societies, including the Academy itself, on their development, aims and objectives, membership, finance and resources, research, outreach and promotional activities, work with postgraduates, international activities and other links. It was also intended to identify the need for particular advice and training on different dimensions of knowledge transfer and public engagement and to explore other ways that the Academy of Social Sciences and the ESRC could usefully work with the learned societies.

The proposal was discussed further within the Academy and then with Professor Ian Diamond, Chief Executive of the ESRC, and Dr Astrid Wissenburg, Director of Communications and Information at the ESRC. Both the Academy and the ESRC

agreed that it would be valuable to explore how best they could work together, and with the learned societies, to enable people to engage more closely with the social sciences.

As a result of these discussions, the aims and objectives were honed resulting in a more modest proposal for a one-year study of knowledge transfer, public engagement and the learned societies in the social sciences.

One of the priorities would be to explore the potential for greater engagement between the learned societies in the social sciences and policy makers, practitioners and the wider public. The objectives included identifying current activities, flagging up opportunities for more knowledge transfer and public engagement work, highlighting barriers and obstacles, and increasing awareness of the issues and opportunities amongst the learned societies. It was also intended to identify ways that the Academy, ESRC and the learned societies could work together to promote knowledge transfer activities and stimulate informed public debate in areas relevant to social science.

It was agreed at the outset that the study should be collaborative with both the Academy and the ESRC contributing resources. The two organisations wanted a clear partnership approach. Both the Academy and the ESRC have an established and growing commitment to promoting dissemination of research findings to a wider audience and to enabling greater public engagement. Both bodies have a positive approach to collaborative working involving researchers in the social sciences, the learned societies, practitioners and policy makers, and other groups, and so it seemed appropriate to work closely together on a study of how to develop and enhance this work.

Developing definitions

A steering group was established at an early stage in the project and this played an important role in the study. Early meetings of the steering group spent some time considering different conceptions of 'knowledge transfer' and 'public engagement'. It was clear that the meaning of some aspects of these terms was contested but it was accepted that both activities involve dialogue of various kinds. Such dialogue needs

to be open and proactive and wherever possible should involve an exchange of knowledge and ideas.

This accords with the views of the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology outlined in its report on *Science and Society*, published in 2000. The inquiry, chaired by Lord Jenkin, said that the dialogue they advocated entailed open exchange and sharing of knowledge, ideas, values and beliefs between scientists, the public(s), stakeholders and decision makers.

The importance of this sort of dialogue was underlined by the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills in the speech he made at the RSA on 16 January 2008 (DIUS, 2008a). Mr Denham called for a 'mature relationship between the media, the public, scientists and government', with improved 'talking but, more importantly, listening':

Encouraging two-way communication with the public in the development of science policy must be a priority.

The 'public' is usually taken, in simple terms, to refer to 'ordinary people' or 'the community in general'. Burawoy (2005, p.265) uses the terms 'academic' and 'extra-academic' to discuss the two sides of social sciences dialogue and notes the great varieties of publics that may be involved. It is clear there are many possible 'publics' depending on the particular context, so public engagement activities need to take this into account. Effective dialogue about social science issues with groups of school children in a market town might need to be quite different from, say, groups of older people in an inner-city community centre.

Different groups of the public can be identified according to a variety of criteria. For example, the OST and Wellcome Trust report (2000), on *Science and the Public*, identified six different groups of the public, based on their attitudes towards science. At one end were the 'technophiles' (20%) who were positive and well-informed but sceptical of the regulatory system, 'confident believers' (17%) who were positive about benefits from science and the way it was regulated, and 'supporters' (17%) who were positive about rapid technological change and government control. The less positive groups of the public were the 'not sure' (17%) who were not interested in science and had few opinions, the 'not for me' (15%) who were

uninterested themselves but could see the potential benefits, and the ‘concerned’ (13%) who are interested in science but uncertain about its negative effects and sceptical about its control and regulation.

There was also discussion in the project steering group about the meaning of the term ‘practitioners’. After consideration it was agreed to use the term to mean non-academic non-research people from institutions and organisations which would benefit from social science knowledge, understanding and expertise. These might include politicians, civil servants and other public officials, at different levels of government from local, national, European and beyond, professionals from a wide variety of backgrounds, the media, business people and commercial bodies, and others from the public, private and voluntary sectors.

In light of these discussions the project steering group decided to adopt the definitions of knowledge transfer and public engagement used at that time by the Economic and Social Research Council:

- *Knowledge transfer* is taken to be ‘a set of processes aimed at transferring knowledge from researchers to users. Although presented as a linear concept, it is widely understood to be more complex. Within the ESRC, knowledge transfer relates specifically to those processes and initiatives to support the direct use of findings by specific users in the public, private and third sectors.’
- Public engagement is ‘the involvement of specialists listening to, developing their understanding of, and interacting with, non-specialists. It is a participatory model of consultation to inform policy development and promoting the flow of authoritative information and exchange of views between scientists, members of the public and policy-makers. For the ESRC this includes providing opportunities for public engagement; supporting social scientists to develop the skills to communicate with different publics; and helping young people to understand the role of social science to their lives.’

These definitions, while not necessarily agreed in every detail by all the AcSS members and learned societies involved in the project, were for practical purposes adopted for use in the study.

Undertaking the Study

The scope of the revised one-year project and its funding arrangements were agreed by the beginning of July 2007. Invitations to tender for the project were then issued and William Solesbury Associates were appointed as consultants to undertake the research.

Work began in August 2007. The objectives were discussed with the consultants and agreed to be: improving the knowledge and understanding of learned societies' current activities in knowledge transfer and public engagement; identifying opportunities to expand this work; increasing awareness of the aims of the ESRC and funding opportunities; and highlighting how such work might be resourced, organised and promoted. The final objective was identify ways that the Academy, ESRC and the learned societies could work together beneficially to promote knowledge transfer activities and stimulate informed public debate in areas relevant to the social sciences.

The steering group held its first meeting in September 2007 and met regularly throughout the project. Its membership included four nominees from the ESRC, including one from DIUS and another from the Scottish Funding Council, and nine members of learned societies, including the Academy itself. The project consultants attended and contributed to the meetings. The steering group not only assisted in managing and directing the study but its comments and deliberations constituted a significant part of the research process. A great deal of useful information emerged from the steering group, and its members facilitated the research process in a variety of significant ways.

The study employed a variety of methods including: analysis of documents, annual trustees' reports and web pages of learned societies; interviews with society representatives and non-academic practitioners; a workshop with representatives of learned societies, the AcSS and the ESRC; examination of materials, newsletters and pamphlets prepared by various learned societies; face-to-face interviews with other key informants in policy and practice roles; preparation of ten case studies; discussions in meetings of the College of Learned Societies and elsewhere within the

Academy. Indeed, in addition to meetings of the project steering group, the study was discussed on no less than 14 occasions within the Academy, including meetings of the Executive, Council, and College of Learned Societies.

The work of the project was divided into three phases – *fact-finding*, *exploring demand*, and *drawing conclusions and making recommendations*. The *fact-finding* phase began in August 2007 with a detailed analysis of the work of the learned societies. This entailed collecting and examining copies of annual reports and other appropriate documents, including reports, publications and leaflets. Web sites were visited and information was collected and recorded.

A profile of each learned society was compiled using a common template that was discussed and agreed by the steering group. The idea was to obtain data on similar dimensions from each of the 32 learned societies, including the Academy itself, to assist in making comparisons and analysing differences. The profile for each society provides basic contact information including name, address and website. It then lists status, mission and objectives, membership, governance, annual income, staff numbers, subject and regional groups, international associations, KT/PE responsibilities, and partnerships and associations. The final section of the profile concerns the activities undertaken by the learned society, including journals, other publications, conferences, other events, awards and prizes, school support, displays and DVDs, expert speakers, submissions and responses, and press releases.

The societies were then invited to examine their profiles and make any necessary revisions, which most of them did. Telephone interviews were then conducted with representatives from each learned society, with a response rate of 78 per cent. The interviews covered three broad topics – (1) the rationale for and influences on the society's approach to knowledge transfer and public engagement; (2) the success or otherwise of the society's various activities; (3) how such work might be enhanced in the future. The topics were notified to the interviewees in advance to enable them to consult other colleagues in the society and in some cases the interviews involved more than one society representative.

An important event in the fact-finding phase was a conference held in London on 2 October 2007. This was well-attended by members of the learned societies with 27

present, including representatives from the Foundation for Science and Technology and the Wellcome Trust. They heard a number of presentations which introduced the project and outlined different approaches to knowledge transfer and engagement with the public and particular groups. The conference also included six presentations outlining case studies of knowledge transfer and public engagement activities. This was a valuable occasion in terms of data collection and facilitating the overall study.

A report was prepared on the first phase and considered by the steering group. This included discussion of the typology of learned societies activities and the analysis of different societies' capabilities. In the second phase of *exploring demand* the project investigated the demand outside the academic and research world for the knowledge and expertise that learned societies and the Academy have to offer, and how it might best be met.

Interviews were conducted with a selection of individuals from the worlds of government policy-making, parliamentary scrutiny, public and independent research funders and a commercial research organisation. They offered views as people from organisations which might be expected to want and need to use social science knowledge and expertise. The interviews focused on three questions: (1) what does social science knowledge and expertise contribute to your work? (2) among the sources you draw upon, what do you believe is the particular contribution of the social sciences? (3) how could knowledge and expertise in these disciplines be more accessible and useful?

[BOX 2 about here]

During this phase work also commenced on ten case studies of knowledge transfer and public engagement activities undertaken by learned societies which are included in the final project report. A report on the exploring demand phase was considered by the steering group in February 2008. This meeting also approved the proposed outline of the final report. The third phase on conclusions and recommendation was completed by May 2008 when the consultants sent their final report to the Academy.

The report was then sent to all societies in membership of the Academy for their comments and suggestions. A large number of views were received and these were collated and incorporated into the revised final report.

Findings I – Activities

The final report on the project was published under the title *Developing Dialogue* (Benyon and David, 2008). After outlining the background, context and objectives of the study, the report highlights some of what the Academy and the member learned societies currently do in terms of knowledge transfer and public engagement work. This is followed by an assessment of their capabilities for such work and what influences these capabilities. Next *Developing Dialogue* explores what the learned societies can contribute to policy, practice and public debates and summarises their strengths and weaknesses. It then analyses what resources and organisation are needed for effective knowledge transfer and public engagement work. Finally, the report draws some conclusions, and makes some recommendations about the way forward.

BOX 3 about here

As indicated in Box 3, taken together the learned societies which are in membership of the Academy of Social Sciences are involved in a wide variety of knowledge transfer and public engagement work. However, while most of them produce journals and other sorts of publications, and hold annual conferences, there is considerable variation in their involvement in other activities. *Developing Dialogue* also notes that there are various other things that may be worth consideration by learned societies in the social sciences and by the Academy itself, such as inquiry and advice services, campaigns, and arts projects.

The range of knowledge transfer and public engagement activities reported in *Developing Dialogue* cover most if not all of those noted in recent national, science-wide surveys that are appropriate to organisations like the AcSS and the other bodies surveyed (Research Councils UK, 2007). However, it became clear that not all of the societies studied placed the same priority on knowledge transfer and public engagement work.

The study found that all learned societies saw supporting the academic work and professional interests of their members as an important goal but the study found that about one third of the societies saw this as their principal or exclusive role. Another third aspired to complement this role by engaging with organisations or individuals outside the academy or profession, but largely lacked the capacities and skills to do so. The final third of the societies were already active in knowledge transfer and public engagement work but, in some cases, were keen to be more successful and to expand their activities.

Findings II – Capabilities

The study found that there seem to be three influential factors which affect learned societies' capabilities in this work: *purpose*, *capacities* and *relationships*.

Purpose concerns whether learned societies see knowledge transfer and public engagement work as core aims. Those that do may express this in their mission statements. For example, the Royal Statistical Society's stated purposes include: 'To promote the discipline of statistics by disseminating and encouraging statistical knowledge and good practice with both producers and consumers of statistics, and in society at large.' The Social Research Association states that its objective is 'to advance for the public benefit the conduct, development, knowledge, professional practice, education, promotion and dissemination of social research.'

Capacities are the resources that learned societies possess and choose to allocate to knowledge transfer and public engagement work, including the time and efforts of society members and staff, through special interest groups, as authors and editors, as speakers and spokespersons. Capacities also include societies' paid staff, whether full or part-time employees, or freelance workers engaged by the society to undertake specific tasks. Some of the larger learned societies employ professional staff to undertake, for example, media relations and external affairs work. The study found there was considerable scope for beneficial exchanges of experience and training to develop skills and methods among the Academy's member societies.

Relationships with other bodies and individuals can assist societies to undertake knowledge transfer and public engagement. These might include professional associations, publishing companies, service providers, campaigning organisations, think tanks or interest groups. Such relationships can enhance the standing of a society, create further opportunities to communicate and be heard, and may well attract more resources including financial support. As an example, the Social Services Research Group has a partnership with the Social Care Institute for Excellence, which shares the society's interests in social care research but has more resources than the society. Such relationships can considerably assist in promoting better dialogue.

The study found that a note of caution needed to be entered about societies' capabilities. It became clear from comments made during the project that many academics believed that the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) had led to adverse effects on knowledge transfer and public engagement activities. Writing on behalf of a learned society, one senior academic stated:

The Research Assessment Exercise has created a major discouragement to university-based academics in undertaking such work since it secures no benefit in the RAE and is positively discouraged or even prevented as an activity by some heads and vice-chancellors who do not wish to see their staff preparing publications or undertaking other activities that have no benefit to RAE status.

The study found that the RAE has worked against capacities, in that it has become more difficult to persuade academics to become involved in knowledge transfer or public engagement work, and has also adversely affected relationships and purpose. Similar disincentives were reported in the Wellcome Trust/MORI (2000) study *The Role of Scientists in Public Debate*. The study found that there were real impediments to persuading scientists to get involved in knowledge transfer and public engagement.

Many academics did not see these activities, and even lifelong learning work, as being mainstream as they were not encouraged and, for example, did not count towards promotion. Wellcome and MORI called for greater rewards from employers such as universities and other institutions for staff who engage with the public and business. However, the RAE has continued to work against this. It is positive to see

that John Denham, the Secretary of State for DIUS, has recognised the problem of ‘disincentives in the system’ and has said that the encouragement of public and policy engagement activities needs to be central to the RAE review (DIUS 2008a, p. 13):

I feel we need to have a discussion on whether there is more we can do to ensure that this essential work is not undervalued.

Findings III – Contributions

In addition to exploring the knowledge transfer and public engagement work of the learned societies, and their capabilities and limitations, the research also examined the distinctive contributions that learned societies can make. The study concluded that these might usefully be grouped under three characteristics: *knowledge*, *perspective*, and *methods and skills*. Of course, many of the learned societies can contribute in each of these three ways.

First, the learned society’s discipline may offer substantive *knowledge* about a field of policy or practice or a matter of public interest – looking, for instance, at comparisons with other countries, patterns and trends, the potential impact of developments or the likely effects of new policies. This would seem to be a big potential contribution of learned societies in fields such as housing, health, education, the environment, social policy, the media, and crime, policing and punishment.

Secondly, the discipline may offer a particular *perspective* for understanding different aspects of society, the economy, politics or international issues – matters like human behaviour, relationships, learning, communication, and organisational dynamics can be explored, for example, in terms of psychology, politics, management, economics, linguistics, sociology, and history.

Thirdly, the discipline may bring certain *methods and skills* to bear on aspects of society – including those exercised by particular professions, like social workers or town planners, or those more widely applicable, like statistics or evaluation.

When the practitioners from various organisations were asked their views about the contributions that research in the social sciences could make, and how knowledge transfer and public engagement might be improved, the results showed that there was little awareness of social science learned societies or how to go about accessing disciplinary-based knowledge and understanding. Some respondents expressed frustration that relatively few learned societies make their members' research or expertise readily available to those with a professional interest. It was said that researchers were not sufficiently proactive in communicating the findings from their studies. A common view was summarised by one respondent:

Social science academics have failed to support us. Their research is not ready and they are not prepared to talk sooner. They are not taking initiatives to disseminate their ideas.

Some of those who were interviewed contrasted the more visible stance of research organisations in the private and voluntary sectors with the less proactive approach of the learned societies:

Think tanks and NGOs do send us stuff. Some is interesting, but it is not as good as academics would do. But they know how to market and embargo – the tricks – and therefore they get coverage even if what they say is not so good.

In contrast, respondents regarded learned societies as more reliable and independent. Their independence, their broad membership, and their association with rigorous standards of research, were seen as giving learned societies a different and enhanced status. However, it was clear that academics and researchers aiming to engage in knowledge transfer and public engagement need to accept 'the rules of the game' in order to be effective.

In particular, relevance to and awareness of changing agendas and political contexts, timeliness in addressing issues, sensitivity to the practical limits on action, and clarity and brevity in communication are needed. As one person put it: 'The language and style of academic reports are often off-putting'. It was felt that learned societies should be able to assist researchers in getting these things right and acting as intermediaries between researchers and practitioners:

Having an interpreter is very useful, because peer-reviewed material needs interpretation.

Another view from practitioners was that contemporary issues and problems often cross disciplinary boundaries and learned societies, and particularly the Academy itself, might be able to assist in combining different disciplinary approaches. It was said that bringing people with different types of expertise together to address an issue can be creative. A related point was that different disciplinary perspectives can sometimes help to reframe issues. As one respondent put it:

Social scientists are good at unpicking issues and recasting them to expose self-reinforcing myths and getting space for critical purchase.

Finally, a number of those interviewed reiterated the difficulties of finding sources of independent social sciences expertise and felt that the learned societies and the Academy should be doing more to promote such sources. More frequent updates on current thinking from academics and researchers and an up-to-date directory of experts would be welcome. As one respondent put it:

The frustration is that there is no single directory of social science experts.

Findings IV – Weaknesses and strengths

Based on the evidence that was collected from practitioners, case studies, researchers and the learned societies themselves, it is possible to identify a number of weaknesses and strengths that the learned societies have in terms of knowledge transfer and public engagement. Of course, these vary between the learned societies and not all of them are equally affected.

The *weaknesses* appear to include their generally low profile; their frequent focus on a relatively narrow, discipline-based area of knowledge; their apparent lack of awareness of opportunities to contribute academic thinking to public affairs; their common lack of commitment, resources and skills to be effective in knowledge transfer and public engagement. In addition, as previously discussed, the Research Assessment Exercise has acted as a significant impediment as it appears to have downgraded the value of such work in the eyes of many academics. A final weakness may be lack of sufficient staff and financial resources for such work.

[BOX 4 about here]

The *strengths* of the learned societies and the Academy include their independence, compared to business or government; high levels of trust in their work and contributions to public affairs; their commitment to rigorous standards, giving them a competitive advantage over other sources of information and advice; their access to the breadth of knowledge and expertise both within the membership of individual societies, especially in their specialist groups, and through multi-disciplinary work by collaborating societies, and within the Academy; in some cases, their closeness – through their membership or through active relationships – with particular practitioner communities.

Work on knowledge transfer and public engagement requires appropriate *resources* and *organisation*. The study found that learned societies which are active and successful in these activities have both the necessary resources and an effective organisation. The financial resources may come from a variety of sources, including income from members' subscriptions, savings and investments, fees and charges, publication of journals, sponsorship, individual project funding and contributions in kind from society members or partner organisations.

In terms of organisation, evidence from the research indicates that there are at least four requirements: a member of the society's executive committee (or subcommittee) with responsibility for encouraging and organising knowledge transfer and public engagement activities; skilled staff support, either directly employed or outsourced, to undertake detailed organisation; a small group of members to advise and support the knowledge transfer and public engagement; and a cadre of society members with the knowledge, skills and enthusiasm for undertaking such activities.

Findings V – Six key points

As reported in more detail in *Developing Dialogue*, the study raised a number of central issues around knowledge transfer and public engagement in the social sciences. It seems worth highlighting six key points. *First*, learned societies in the social sciences vary a great deal in their involvement in knowledge transfer and public engagement activities. This reflects the variations between them in size, scale and scope. Some are relatively well-resourced but others do not have the means to

organise many, if any, activities to engage with the public. Taken together, though, the learned societies and the Academy organise a good number of different outreach activities and have acquired a lot of experience and this could usefully be shared between them.

Secondly, there is considerable variation between learned societies in their attitudes towards knowledge transfer and public. Some do not have a strong inclination to become involved in outreach activities, or are unaware of the possibilities of funding or working with others. On the other hand, in those societies that are active positive attitudes are highly evident among their staff and leading trustees. This, then, increases their motivation and confidence in pursuing further activities.

A *third* key point arising from the study is that there is a need for investment in developmental work to strengthen societies' knowledge transfer and public engagement capabilities. This requires clarity of purpose, suitable skills and sufficient resources. The Academy and the ESRC could work together to undertake the training and other investment necessary to assist those societies that want it in developing work in this field. It might be worth reminding learned societies that outreach activities can help to show the public benefit work necessary for charitable status.

[BOX 5 about here]

Fourthly, the Academy and the learned societies have distinctive and important contributions to make in knowledge transfer and public engagement work which are separate from others, such as universities and research councils. A *fifth* point is that multi-disciplinary approaches are often needed to respond effectively to many policy, practice and public issues. This may require different societies to work together or for the Academy to take the lead and draw in relevant expertise from elsewhere.

Finally, partnerships with non-academic organisations can in some cases increase the impact of learned societies' knowledge transfer and public engagement work. Dialogue between researchers and those who may use their knowledge and expertise is likely to be a major factor in identifying opportunities for contributing to

policy, practice and public affairs, in finding effective ways of making that contribution and, not least, in promoting the wider influence of and support for social science research.

Realising the potential

The information gathered during the study indicates that there is considerable potential for the Academy of Social Sciences and many, if not all, of the learned societies to do a good deal more to promote the knowledge transfer and public engagement agenda, much of it in partnership with the ESRC. However, this increased activity will require the provision of the necessary resources. It is also clear that there is still a long way to go before many practitioners and policy makers, let alone members of the wider public, are aware of the work and activities of many of the learned societies in the social sciences, or of the Academy, and of the research of their members.

The Academy and the learned societies offer a means to assist in changing the culture, thinking, approach, and capacities, in the social sciences, to foster increased knowledge transfer and public engagement work. This can be done in various different ways – for example, through enhanced training, finding ways to enable societies to work together, holding conferences and workshops, and joint applications for resources and projects. The Academy of Social Sciences provides a distinctive and effective conduit to reach many researchers and is seeking resources to enable it to develop this dimension of its work.

A major conclusion of the study is that the Academy, ESRC and learned societies should work together to develop a clear and practical agenda in the areas of knowledge transfer and public engagement to support and inform their closer collaboration and partnership. Various ideas are included in *Developing Dialogue* and a meeting of the steering group took place on 25 September 2008 to consider how matters might be taken forward.

The study found that the Academy of Social Sciences offers an effective channel to work with learned societies and academicians to develop activities in this field, in partnership with the ESRC wherever appropriate. The report mentions a variety of

possibilities and the Academy, working with the ESRC, is well-placed to take a lead in identifying what works and to help in promoting best practice. The Academy is also ideally positioned to work with learned societies and the ESRC in experimenting with new approaches and promoting collaboration between different societies and disciplines.

One thing that emerges from the project is that improved communication with practitioners, policy makers and the wider public should be based on a positive model of engagement. This underlines the belief in the Academy of Social Sciences and the Economic and Social Research Council that a two-way dialogue should be promoted wherever possible, involving academics and researchers and different groups of the public. This is why the final report was entitled *Developing Dialogue*.

Social science dialogue with the public and practitioners should clearly be a continuing one, with a range of events and activities to enable knowledge transfer, provision of information and opportunities to raise questions. Such dialogue can promote change in organisations and institutional cultures (Giddens, 1991). Ideally, whenever possible engagement on particular policy or research developments or issues should take place early in the process – what has been called ‘upstream’. This enables people to engage more fully and is likely to decrease cynicism about many ‘consultations’ and increase confidence and trust. It may well also lead to better research and better decisions.

It seems clear that the potential that has been identified will only be realised if sufficient resources are made available to the Academy of Social Sciences and the learned societies from bodies such as the ESRC and DIUS to enable it to happen.

Research in the social sciences makes a big contribution to the United Kingdom’s economy, society and politics and to improving people’s well-being. Knowledge transfer and public engagement offer ways to increase and develop this contribution and make it more effective. Much has been done but there is much yet to do.

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BOXES for inclusion with article by John Benyon

BOX 1 Learned societies in membership of the Academy of Social Sciences in June 2008

Association for Tourism in Higher Education	ATHE
Association of Family Therapy	AFT
Association of Social Anthropologists	ASA
British Academy of Management	BAM
British Association for American Studies	BAAS
British Association of International & Comparative Education	BAICE
British Association for Slavonic & East European Studies	BASEES
British Association of Applied Linguistics	BAAL
British Educational Research Association	BERA
British Psychological Society	BPS
British Society of Criminology	BSC
British Society of Gerontology	BSG
British Sociological Association	BSA
Economic History Society	EHS
Feminist & Women's Studies Association	FWSA
Gender and Education Association	GEA
Housing Studies Association	HSA
Joint University Council	JUC
Leisure Studies Association	LSA
Media, Communications & Cultural Studies Assoc.	MECCSA
Political Studies Association	PSA
Regional Studies Association	RSA
Royal Geographical Society – Institute of British Geographers	RGS-IBG
Royal Statistical Society	RSS
Royal Town Planning Institute	RTPI
Society of Legal Scholars	SLS
Social Policy Association	SPA
Social Research Association	SRA
Social Services Research Group	SSRG
Society for Research in Higher Education	SRHE
Society for Studies in Organising for Healthcare	SHOC
Socio-Legal Studies Association	SLSA
University Association for Contemporary European Studies	UACES
UK Evaluation Society	UKES

BOX 2 Case Studies of Learned Societies' Activities

The following ten case studies were chosen to exemplify the range of knowledge exchange and public engagement activities currently undertaken by learned societies in the social sciences.

Journals

Royal Statistical Society

Professional user reviews

British Education Research Association

Annual conference

United Kingdom Evaluation Society

Public events

Academy of Social Sciences

Annual awards ceremony

Political Studies Association of the United Kingdom

Resources for schools

Economic History Society

World of sociology DVD

British Sociological Association

Directory of experts

University Association for Contemporary European Studies

Consultations on public policy

British Psychological Society

Media relations

Royal Geographical Society – Institute of British Geographers

BOX 3 – Knowledge transfer or public engagement activities undertaken by one or more of the learned societies

Journals – often published in partnership with an academic publisher. Some societies publish separate journals for practitioners – for example, the Royal Statistical Society's *Applied Statistics*.

Other publications – some societies publish material designed for policy, practice or public audiences. For example the Political Studies Association produces a well-illustrated publication called *Political Studies UK*, subtitled 'Studying, Teaching and Researching Politics in the United Kingdom'. It is aimed at a diverse public audience.

Annual conferences – most learned societies hold an annual conference and some encourage involvement by practitioners. For example, the British Educational Research Association has an additional day on which research is presented to, and discussed by, practitioners.

Other events – seminars, workshops, lectures and other conferences that bring researchers and practitioners together are organised by some societies. Examples include the public lecture series of the Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers, seminars organised by the Regional Studies Association, and events run by the AcSS.

Awards and prizes – some societies make annual awards to academics and sometimes to practitioners. Examples include the annual awards ceremony of the Political Studies Association and the annual awards to journalists introduced by the University Association for Contemporary European Studies (UACES) and Reuters.

School teaching resources – some societies have produced material for use in schools: for example, the Economic History Society published a REFRESH series of publications that is now going online as E-REFRESH.

Displays and DVDS – some societies produce visual material – the British Sociological Association has a DVD entitled the *World of Sociology* and a number of societies offer podcasts of conference or seminar presentations.

Expert speakers – most societies will respond to requests for experts who can offer advice or views. A few societies have published directories of their members' expertise: an example is ExpertOnEurope.com run by UACES.

Submissions and responses to government on policy and practice matters – some societies are active in making submissions to inquiries or policy reviews or responding to consultations. Examples include the British Psychological Society, the Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers and the Royal Statistical Society.

Press releases – a number of societies issue press releases on papers presented at their annual conferences and other events and some – notably the British Psychological Society – get good press coverage. Fewer societies seek to engage with the media on matters on the policy, practice or public agendas and it seems clear that more could be done in this respect.

Training – some societies provide training for their members. Both the Social Research Association and the British Academy of Management offer training events and the AcSS is planning to do so as resources permit.

BOX 4 – Weaknesses and strengths of the learned societies and the Academy in knowledge transfer and public engagement activities

Weaknesses

Generally low profile
Single disciplinary focus
Lack of awareness of opportunities
Lack of commitment to these activities
RAE undermining of this work
Insufficient staff and resources

Strengths

Independent of government and business
Trust in work and contributions
Commitment to rigorous standards
Access to breadth of expertise
Links with practitioner communities
New ways of looking at problems

BOX 5 – Six key findings on increasing knowledge transfer and public engagement activities of learned societies and the Academy

- The size and scope of learned societies, and their involvement in knowledge transfer and public engagement work, is highly variable, but taken together there is a great deal and variety of practical experience.
- Attitudes towards knowledge transfer and public engagement within learned societies is an important factor in explaining the variation between societies.
- Strengthening societies' commitment to such work is a developmental task requiring clarity of purpose, suitable skills and sufficient resources.
- The Academy of Social Sciences and the learned societies need to promote a distinctive contribution to knowledge transfer and public engagement to differentiate their work from that of others in the field, but they have much to offer.
- Cross-disciplinary approaches are often needed to respond effectively to many policy, practice and public agendas.
- Partnerships with non-academic practitioners may increase the impact of learned societies' knowledge transfer and public engagement work.