Evaluation of Learned Societies
Project 2014

Robert Dingwall
Michael Hewitt
Ilke Turkmendag

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This is a study of 44 UK learned societies in the social sciences to investigate their current income streams and the uses to which they are put in order to characterize the societies' impact and value. Learned societies are mutual organizations, typically of scholars from a single academic discipline or of scholars, practitioners and policymakers sharing a focus on a particular scientific field. A few older societies also have a significant lay or public membership. As such, they constitute the infrastructure for communities of practice. They provide a mixture of services to their own members, to higher education and research more generally, to policy and practitioner users, to schools and colleges, and to the wider public. Learned societies do not generally produce research, other than to inform their own activities. They are best understood as intermediaries in the process of knowledge exchange, building communities that facilitate the flow of ideas and empirical data across a number of institutional boundaries.

Learned societies are very diverse organizations, which makes generalization difficult. Larger societies tend to be registered as charities, which requires them, under UK law, to demonstrate public benefit from their activities and to publish accounts in standard formats. Smaller societies mostly operate as unincorporated associations, giving them a great deal more flexibility. The diversity of scales and forms is a significant constraint on quantitative evaluation methodologies. There is no standard set of metrics, apart from the financial reporting of larger societies. The report presents quantitative data where available, but these must be read with caution and in the context of the qualitative data that they summarize. Variability in participation and reporting by societies also means that the picture here is conservative: it reflects what societies stated in interviews, questionnaires or websites. While the income data are likely to be quite comprehensive, the activity data probably understate the nature and extent of what societies do for their members and the wider public.

**Overview of the sector and the principal revenue streams**
Collectively, the societies reported just over 161,000 members in 2012: most societies have found membership to be stable or slightly increasing over the last five years.

The societies generated approximately £40.8 million income during 2012. This has been relatively stable at an aggregate level over the last five years. The distribution is highly skewed: five societies account for 75.6 per cent of the total.

In aggregate, the largest source of income is membership subscriptions (45.4%, £18.5m), followed by publishing (17.5%, £7.1m) and conferences (7.0%, £2.8m)

Societies fall broadly into three groups – those with incomes >£4 m (Group 1); those with incomes between £200K and £2.5m (Group 2); those with incomes < £200K (Group 3). Group 1 societies (N=4) derive the largest proportion of their incomes from subscriptions: none has more than 15 per cent of its income from publishing. The level of subscription income reflects the role of these large societies in offering professional accreditation to their members. A substantial majority (11/16) of Group 2 societies derive more than 40 per cent of their income from publishing – where they do not, the gap tends to be filled by
conference surpluses. Only 2/13 Group 3 societies have significant income from publishing and also tend to rely on conference surpluses.

The sector employed at least 415 staff in 2012 but it was not possible to determine WTE. This was supported by a very substantial contribution of volunteer effort. Six societies offered estimates of the number of hours donated, which would represent a value of between £80K and £170K per year, depending on the imputed wage rate\(^1\). One of the largest societies was able to provide detailed figures suggesting a voluntary contribution of labour from its members worth between £½ million and £1 million per year.

**Main Areas of Activity**
This is considered under the broad headings of public benefit, as required by UK charity law, and communities of practice, offering sectoral benefit to research and higher education, as well as direct membership benefits. The figures presented here refer to activity reported in interviews or recorded on society websites. Feedback from societies on earlier drafts of this report suggests that these are probably underestimates because a good deal of activity is not fully documented, particularly in terms of less formal work with the public, policymakers or the media. This would include suggesting speakers for events, dealing with individual queries or answering one-off calls from journalists and civil servants.

**Public Benefit**

Twenty-two of 40 societies (55.0%) reported activities aimed at informing national policy and practice.

Fifteen of 40 societies (37.5%) reported activities that can be classified as international outreach and promotion of the UK’s knowledge, culture and values.

Twenty-one of 40 societies (52.5%) reported offering accreditation and/or CPD and training opportunities for their members.

Ten of 40 societies (25.0%) reported programmes of work with schools and/or the promotion of educational material for the general public.

Ten of 40 societies (25.0%) reported activities specifically geared to constructive engagement with the media.

**Communities of Practice**

Virtually all societies organize an annual conference for their members and other subject specialists, which typically attracts between 10% and 30% of participants from outside the UK. Twenty-four of 40 societies reported delegate numbers for their main annual

\(^1\) Lower boundary based on UK median hourly wage of £11.21 (Office for National Statistics, 2012); upper boundary based on the median hourly wage for ‘higher education teaching professionals’ of £23.56 (Office for National Statistics, 2012).
conference. Using a cost of time method, the aggregate value of these conferences is estimated to be at least £3.24m and may be as high as £6.82 million².

Societies received at least £7.1m in revenue from all forms of publishing in 2012. 70-80% of this is likely to have been generated from subscribers outside the UK. Society journals are typically available through 3-4,000 institutions, of which only 5% are in the UK. Another 3-5,000 institutions in developing countries benefit from some form of philanthropic access. Learned society journals seem to have higher than average impact factors within their discipline.

Thirty-six of 40 societies (90.0%) reported specific events and activities that promote networking and knowledge exchange, in addition to their annual conferences. Fifteen of the 40 societies (37.5%) reported contributions to higher education policy and practice.

Most societies regarded support for early career members, both postgraduate and postdoctoral, as a priority. Even where they were unable to fund specific additional activities, they would offer networking opportunities for early career members, either online or within their main conference, or produce materials available through their website to assist in professional development. Fourteen of the 40 societies (35.0%) reported specific activities that support the development of early career researchers. Data on this expenditure category is not always explicitly reported. However, we have been able to identify at least £249,508 annually being directed by the learned societies to supporting early career researchers.

Twenty-three of the 40 societies (57.5%) reported specific funds for project and small research grants. Data on this expenditure category is not always explicitly reported. However, we have been able to identify at least £402,252 being directed annually by the learned societies to project and small research grants schemes.

Thirty-one of the 40 societies (77.5%) present awards and prizes to reflect notable or outstanding contributions to their particular field or discipline.

Discussion and Conclusion
Learned societies vary greatly in scale. It is, however, important not to discount the benefits that even relatively small societies provide in creating communities of practice, sustaining particular niches in UK social science by linking individuals or small groups that might otherwise work in considerable isolation.

Because of their distinctive disciplinary focus and financial independence, learned societies have an important challenge function in relation to UK social science research and teaching.

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² These estimates are derived from a calculation of the number of hours attended by delegates at society main conferences, multiplied by a cost of time figure. For this purpose we have used the 2012 UK median hourly wage of £11.21 (Office for National Statistics, 2012) to produce the lower figure and using the median hourly wage for ‘higher education teaching professionals’ of £23.56 (Office for National Statistics, 2012) to produce the higher figure.
policy. This may occasionally be inconvenient for central planners but it is an important contribution to the quality and rigour of the policy process.

As ‘intermediaries’ in ESRC impact terms, learned societies have important roles in translating research to professional and practitioner communities, in inspiring school and college students to consider careers in the social sciences, and in promoting education and training at undergraduate, postgraduate and postdoctoral levels.

Learned societies make a valuable contribution to UK ‘soft power’, promoting international networks of interest in British institutions, culture, and values. These enhance the UK’s absorptive capacity to benefit from the research of other parties in these networks and its attractiveness to high quality international scholars and students.

In a higher education and research ecosystem that increasingly promotes competition, and institutional forms associated with this, learned societies offer an important alternative model based on collaboration and mutual assistance. This may be of particular value to funders concerned about the possibly divisive effects of excessive competition and their implications for the science base.

In short, learned societies foster discipline-based communities of practice within higher education, and beyond, transcending institutions, nations and sectors. As such, they are a unique and widely welcomed contribution to the Academy. They add value to their community by representing their discipline; by providing a disciplinary forum for sharing and debating knowledge and for making it available to other sectors, including public, schools and policymakers; and by helping build the capacity of academics, practitioners and policymakers in their disciplines.

It is difficult to identify any functions currently performed by the learned societies that could be done more cheaply or effectively by other agents, because of the extent of the voluntary contributions that derive from the commitment and goodwill of members. However, it is arguable that tensions could arise between the ‘public benefit’ functions, required under charity law, and the service functions that attract members, if there were a reduction in publication income.

A future exercise of this kind would benefit from work among the societies to develop a more uniform reporting template, which would also have value for them in terms of benchmarking their performance against others of a similar size and mission. The American Council of Learned Societies is currently working on this issue and the outcome of their project should be examined as a possible model.

UK learned societies in the social sciences vary immensely. This is a challenge to any evaluation and to the development of public policy towards them. They are, however, an important source of energy and dynamism, and a fundamental focus for their discipline and its communities, that deserves recognition and respect from other actors.