SOCIAL INNOVATION NOW

How Social Sciences and Humanities Play their Role in an Age of Crisis

Insight Paper and Policy Brief

CANADIAN COLLABORATIVE FOR SOCIETY, INNOVATION AND POLICY

LE COLLABORATIF CANADIEN POUR LA SOCIÉTÉ, L'INNOVATION ET LA POLITIQUE

SOCIAL INNOVATION NOW. How Social Sciences, and Humanities Play their Role in an Age of Crisis

This White Paper aims to: 1. help dispel misconceptions and biases about the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH), 2. foster new attitudes and ideas about their value, and 3. articulate with greater precision the kinds of frameworks, activities, and initiatives that SSH researchers and their institutions should pursue to bolster their capacity to contribute to social and public innovation.

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Acknowledgements

Our thanks to Tim Wilson and Karine Morin for their careful review, input and suggestions.

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SSH's Role in a Public and Social Innovation Strategy

Reframing the Public Value of SSH Knowledge

At a high level, the social sciences and humanities can be powerful drivers of innovation. Despite the stereotype that many of these disciplines produce abstract knowledge that is not useful in the "real world," SSH research produces insights into the human and social dimensions of a wide range of pressing challenges and questions that can benefit our societies and communities. A historian explaining changes and continuities in fossil fuel use over the course of a century; a political scientist analyzing voter attitudes about proposed climate legislation; a literature scholar exploring depictions of environmental despoilation in novels; and a gender studies scholar deconstructing gendered identities in relation to ideas about nature, are all deepening our collective understanding of how human societies and natural systems interact and how people think about and use natural resources in different places and times. This knowledge matters on its own terms and for its own sake, and for many researchers, contributing to the expansion of what we know and understand is its own purpose. But these forms of knowledge and insight can also be useful for the kinds of changes in attitudes, values, norms, practices, and interventions that generate social public and innovation, and few would deny that in many contexts, SSH researchers should strive to contribute to society in these and other ways.

There is broad agreement amongst those who study social change that social sciences and humanities research and experts must embrace a more prominent and public role in efforts to address the pressing societal challenges of the twenty first century. Canadian society needs viable and durable evidence-based approaches to tackle the complexities of climate change, geopolitical and economic disruptions, pandemics, housing crises, chronic diseases, systemic forms of discrimination, mass migration, and artificial intelligence, to name just a few of the current decade's formidable challenges. We need evidence-informed policy procedures and instruments to enact effective solutions. But the complex, systemic nature of these challenges, all of which have profound human and social dimensions, cannot come from the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) disciplines alone. Viable innovations require contributions from the full range of research expertise in Canada and across the world. Yet, SSH research is presently not realizing its full potential to make a difference on these and other issues.

The STEM Bias and Persistent Misconceptions About SSH

There are several barriers to bringing SSH research into deeper and more productive forms of engagement with the publics and social sector actors currently wrestling with tough transitions and wickedly complex issues. One of the most significant barriers lies in public perceptions of the relative practical value of SSH research and assumptions about the dominion of the "hard science"/STEM disciplines, which tend to be viewed as best suited to contribute to innovation and prosperity. In a context governed by economistic definitions and quantitative measures of value and benefit, SSH disciplines are often deemed to be less effective than STEM when it comes to dealing with real world problems. This STEM bias finds expression in the well-worn "barista myth," which claims that university graduates—including those with MAs and PhDs—in SSH fields are destined for low-paid service work because their knowledge and skills lack sufficient "real world"

value. In addition to being wrong, this myth is counterproductive from the standpoint of social innovation in Canada.

Limits of Legacy Innovation Models

The power and persistence of this STEM bias in policy and media, as well as in public discourse about education and jobs, goes hand in hand with models for innovation strategy that continue to dominate policy. When they were first developed, in the first half of the twentieth century, these models prioritized scientific research dedicated to advancing technological knowledge and bolstering industrial progress at a time where "industry" was focused on agriculture, the extraction and transformation of natural resources, manufacturing and pre-digital conventional warfare. These models tended to view the research-to-society pipeline in a relatively linear and technocratic manner. In a twenty-first-century world that increasingly recognizes the complex interconnectedness of its social, political, environmental, economic, and health crises, and in light of new understandings of human behavior, institutions, and societies that have emerged over the last century, those older models of innovation are no longer sufficient, if they ever were.

Our models of innovation will continue to be inadequate to address twenty-first century challenges until they integrate the forms of knowledge, insight, and skills that SSH can uniquely provide. But transforming innovation in this way will require clearer demonstrations of SSH's real-world value, which will require a renewed willingness from SSH researchers to leverage their strengths and to embrace central roles in innovation discourse and policy, rather than continuing to play a subsidiary role to STEM, or not role at all. SSH's strengths include skills associated with critical thinking and qualitative analysis, deliberation and facilitation, historical and cultural awareness, articulating nuanced accounts and theories of chance, as well as insights and discoveries about how people and societies are organized, function, and evolve.

Academic vs. Societal Impact

Part of what is needed to demonstrate the value and potential of SSH research are apt frameworks that do justice both to the demands of academic scholarship and the imperatives of a publicly funded research ecosystem when it comes to creating value. For instance, the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences (FHSS) proposes that we think of SSH impact as happening along two broad domains of influence: academia and society. Academic impact of SSH's research is portrayed as the result of SSH capacity to advance knowledge (scholarship) and to spread and develop that knowledge by teaching and mentoring students (capacity building).1

1 https://www.cerc.gc.ca/program-programme/docs/STI_priorities-eng.docx

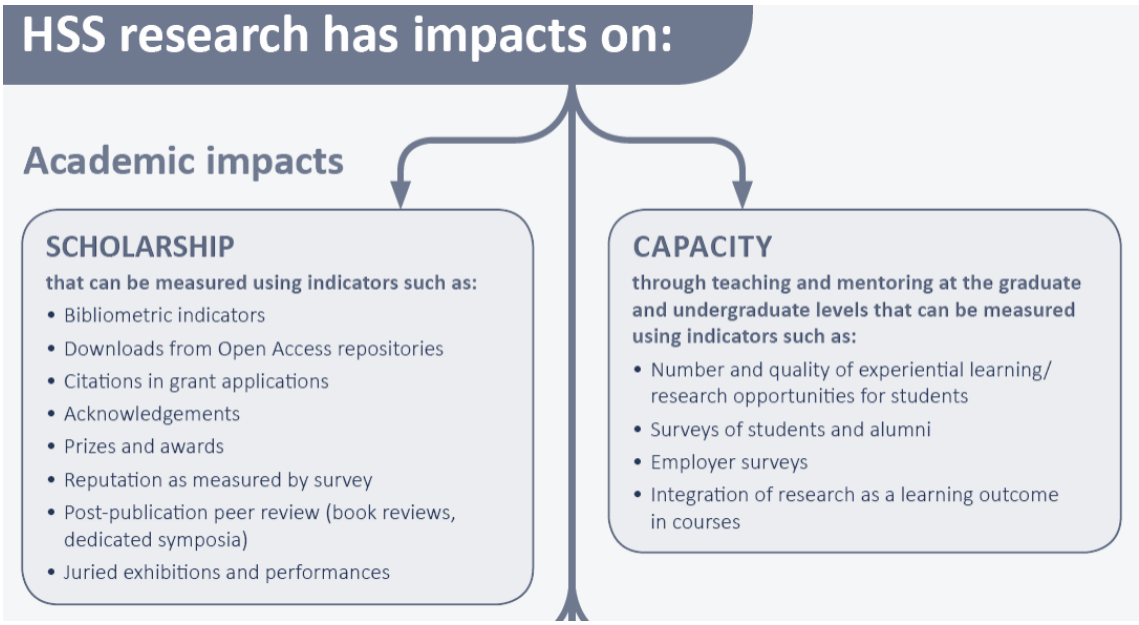

Figure 1: FHSS's (2017) model of SSH's academic impact.

By contrast, SSH's impact on society—its contribution to public and social innovation—is associated with its capacity to drive positive change through collaborations and other types of practices at the interface with policy, society and culture, and the economy.

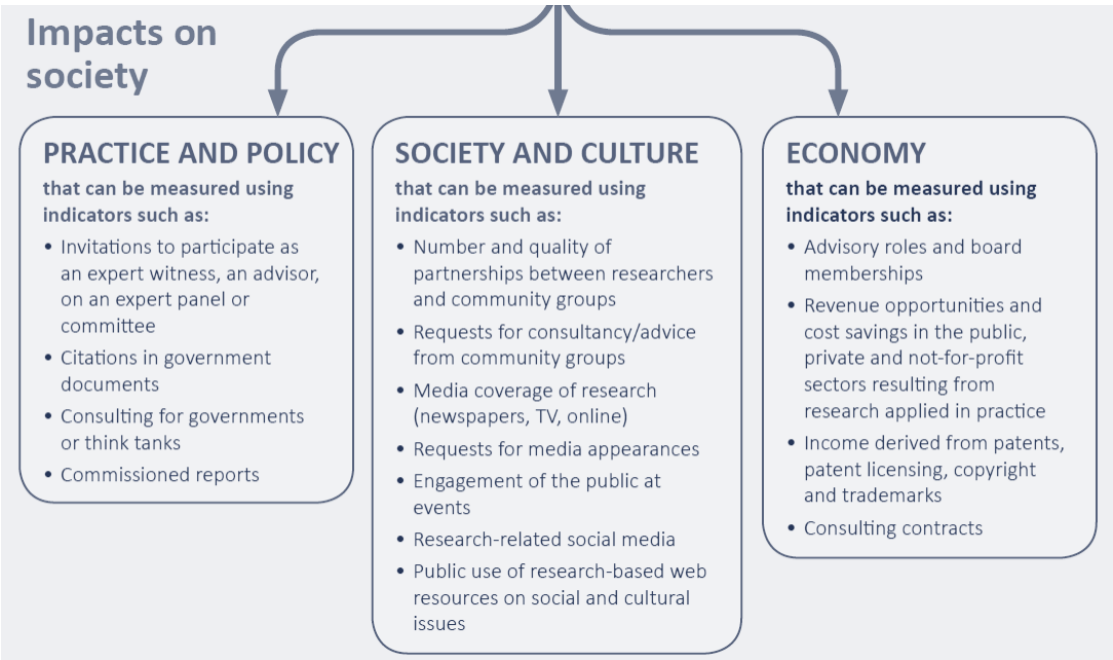

Figure 2: FHSS's (2017) model of SSH's societal impact.

The FHSS framework identifies a series of indicators of societal impact that revolve around dissemination (citations by policy-makers and actors, media coverage, media appearances, social

media engagement), knowledge mobilization activities (public engagement, consulting, advising) and the commercialization of intellectual property. Such activities, to be sure, are part of the broader effort to connect SSH research to society. But to determine whether they are apt indicators, more is needed: we need to understand why they lead to innovation.

What Current Impact Indicators Capture — and What They Miss

The FHSS framework is largely aligned with the ideas that underpin other recent efforts such as the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), the Coalition for the Advancement of Research Assessment (CoARA), and the United Kingdom's Research Excellence Framework (REF), which point to the need for revised research evaluation practices and a focus on societal impact. DORA and CoARA have signaled a shift away from privileging traditional publication metrics as indicators of impact for academic research to motivate richer theories of change when it comes to the role of research in innovation ecosystems, demonstrating a commitment to fostering diverse types of impact. Since the early 2000s, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK has been used to assess research excellence and allocate funding to research institutions. In its most recent iteration in 2021, the REF shifted the focus to research culture, evidence of broader contributions to the advancement of the discipline, and impact case studies tailored to the specific context of a given project. The recent decision by Canada's Tri-Council to introduce a narrative-style CV similarly aims to recognize the societal value of a diverse range of research outputs and to give researchers more flexibility to demonstrate the unique ways in which their work can bolster innovation beyond academia, create real world change and support the well-being of people and communities beyond the academic sphere.

Although these initiatives signal a welcome departure from the most extreme versions of the "publish or perish" culture that has helped build the ivory tower's high walls since the 1950s, they are not nearly enough to position SSH at the heart of public and social innovation. Part of the issue is with the quality of the information we gain when the key indicators are activities and outputs: what is measured is the intensity of the supply of activities and outputs presumed to generate impact, not whether these activities actually have an audience or meet an actual societal demand. These metrics indicate a system of assessment that prioritizes knowledge *supplied by* and *transferred* from the researcher *to* a potential user, rather than a system that encourages more collaborative processes around research design, development, creation, and translation, and which revolves around the actual demands or needs of communities and partners.

Generally speaking, this "supply-driven" model of social and public innovation also prioritizes value created for researchers and the universities rather than for society, thus maintaining or even shifting the significance of SSH away from their capacity to contribute to public and social innovation. Prioritizing the initiative and curiosity of individual researchers must remain part of research strategy, but researcher interests should not evolve in a vacuum. It is a mistake to assume that the way to generate the best knowledge is to shield researchers' interests and curiosity from concerns about the useability and relevance, or that SSH research designed to answer the needs of social and public actors is incompatible with intellectual curiosity or integrity. Indeed, claims of "purity" and "integrity" should always be approached with a great deal of prophylactic skepticism.

Why Supply-Driven Impact Models Fall Short

If the core issue is that these approaches and frameworks remain predominantly supply-driven and researcher-centric, that is, overly focused on the dissemination of specialized research within one's discipline, then SSH research is not serving Canadian and global society to the degree that it could. The focus of current impact frameworks suggests that even when researchers are engaged at the interface with society, their primary target audience is academia, not society. In this sense, the newer responsible research assessment frameworks promoted by DORA and CoARA and researcher funders are designed to assess research that reflects the interest or curiosity of the research community rather than the needs and interests of prospective knowledge users.

Curiosity-Driven Research Cannot Do it All

There is no problem in principle with investigator-led, curiosity-driven research. Indeed, it can personally be difficult to conceive of research that would not somehow be driven by curiosity. It is also clear that researchers should be able to decide what research they should be pursuing and which methods are the most appropriate to use. Researchers should have autonomy and support to guarantee that the research is responsible, equitable, and accountable, while academic institutions must ensure that their researchers have the freedom to pursue a line of inquiry without political interference or suppression.

From a systemic standpoint, however, there are significant gaps in models of research, innovation, and impact that focus exclusively on the interests and priorities of individual researchers. For instance, although none of the objectives of the *Science, Technology and Innovation Priorities for the Canada Excellence Research Chairs Program and the Canada First Research Excellence Fund* can be achieved without substantial input from SSH, funding programs based on a supply-driven model of research have resulted in low levels of interdisciplinary collaboration (i.e. SSH-STEM collaborations). Moreover, of the 70 area of focus, at least 29 are inconsistent with the linear, technology-driven "start-up" logic that is currently driving research investments. The same can be said about the "Canada Strong" platform goals on which the current Liberal government was elected.[2] Given the urgent need of communities and institutions reflected in these priorities and societal goals, the creeping epistemological assumption that SSH and STEM are exclusive domains that can operate in parallel forever is increasingly untenable. SSH need to be involved in virtually all areas of innovation and change, from the economy and culture to science, technology, and medicine.

Demand-Informed, User-Centric Alternatives

Demand-informed, user-centric frameworks for research and innovation, especially in the public and social space, can help produce more engaged research by emphasizing the role of knowledge users at each phase of the research process: problem definition, design, research, development, and implementation. Embedding SSH expertise and disciplinary knowledge alongside contextual knowledges and practical/technical expertise in defining solutions to pressing social challenges is a vital challenge, and one that calls for cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary approaches rooted in collaborative engagement. Public and social innovation actors may also draw on SSH research to assist in the development and implementations of deliberation and co-creation methodologies

2 https://liberal.ca/cstrong/

that underpin the orchestration of missions to address "wicked" problems or increase well-being and prosperity on a larger scale.

	Supply-driven research and innovation	Demand-informed research and innovation
Who decides what is worthy of research?	Researchers	Researcher and partners together
Who is involved in the research process: design, development, implementation?	Researchers	Researchers and partners together
Who decides what research is funded through public funds	Peers (researchers)	Peers (both researchers and knowledge users)
Who decides what success looks like?	Researchers	Researchers, partners and knowledge users together
Who gets the rewards of success?	Researchers	Researchers and partners

Figure 3: Supply-driven versus demand-informed research frameworks

If the goal really is to bring SSH research to bear on pressing societal challenges, which many universities claim is the case, then the first order of business is to address Canada's dysfunctional research ecosystem in which disconnected SSH research is failing to realize its transformative potential. Bringing Canada's higher education, research, policy, and innovation systems into alignment with what we know about generating and mobilizing knowledge for social impact will mean moving from the current researcher-centric model of impact to one that bring together the investigators and the users of SSH knowledge across all sectors, and that builds partnerships and truly values the co-creation of knowledge, especially for the purpose of public and social innovation. This will require increased levels of collaboration and impact literacy within a system designed to :

- incentivise research activities that are demonstrated to produce short- and long-term assets on all sides of the science-society interface,
- organically and yet drastically shift practices toward greater interdisciplinarity and increased interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral collaboration,
- substantially expand co-creation spaces that benefit public and social innovation

This is the picture that is consistent with the knowledge practices Canada needs as part of a collective effort to build prosperity.

Shifting Impact Models: From Diffusion to Collaborative Engagement

One perennial challenge when it comes to justifying government investments in research is in demonstrating that the ideas, knowledge, and insights it produces also create social benefit. The ideal of research for the sake of knowing, like art for art's sake, is magnificent and often deeply inspiring. While it needs to be part of ethos of publicly-funded research institutions that they foster environments where researchers can conduct inquiry without political pressures, as a matter of policy in a context of limited resources, expecting research-for- the-sake-of-research to be the paradigm it is not realistic, or even responsible. Advanced research, as a whole, should be oblivious to public needs and priorities, and the system should include a vision in which research is part of identifying these needs and of defining these priorities.

One important aspect of the challenge pertains to the effectiveness of the processes and methods for the dissemination of results and insights. Much of the dissemination infrastructure for publicly funded research over the last century has focused on diffusion within the research community, with most effort directed toward increasing the number of outputs and streamlining exchanges between researchers. Current models of academic publishing, whether commercial or open access, are almost entirely designed to streamline the academic impact of research, and to making processes associated with scientific accountability (e.g., peer review) more efficient along the way. Traditional research output metrics that revolve around bibliometrics are essentially designed to measure a researcher's success in navigating these channels, and to indicate levels of uptake (i.e., citation outputs, downloads, etc.) traceable to specialists journals. Such efforts are valuable: ensuring swift and efficient access to up-to-date data, results, theories and analyses is crucial to speeding up advances in discovery.

Ideas generated through SSH scholarship, even when moving mostly through academic diffusion pathways, do breach the ivory tower and have affect society in a variety of ways and with different degrees of success. They can shape attitudes and practices related to all possible aspects of our lives e.g. gender identity and sexuality, mental health and wellness, economic policy, religious belief, race relations, and more. But tracing the path of diffusion of SSH ideas beyond academia is challenging. Many in SSH assume that non-academic uptake of their work will be, even in the best circumstances, hard to trace, nonlinear and dispersed, unfolding over different timescales and via a variety of auxiliary modes: through the teaching of citizens, leaders, and workers; through the circulation of books and articles; through media appearances; through consulting practices or advisory roles. By their very nature, diffusion paths for academic research are subject to systemic dynamics that are complex, emergent and thus difficult to track or to quantify. This evasiveness is amplified by the fact that many ideas are generated, modified, and distributed through collective effort over many years across different places and even languages, resisting efforts to pinpoint the moment in time they came to be or matter, or the collaborations that made them happen. The question is: does relying on this-diffusion-centred model of impact suffice?

The Solution is Not in Better Packaging

Over the last few decades research funders have increased pressure on researchers in many fields to demonstrate their efforts to push or mobilize knowledge beyond academic circles to meet the societal needs. As these needs and pressures on SSH researchers have intensified, there have been efforts to modernize knowledge diffusion by focusing on quicker, more efficient, and more

effective ways to get to the right audience. However, finding the "right packaging" for an idea, (i.e. the format or medium that will ease diffusion and uptake with selected audiences) does not address the root problem. Getting tailored information to the right people might open up channels, but translating research for the purpose remains a challenging process, especially if the research questions were designed for fellow researchers and if peer-reviewed publication in specialized academic journals remains the gold standard of research output. Under such conditions, knowledge translation requires researchers to serve two competing purposes. More importantly, perhaps, even when researchers manage to effectively translate their outputs to a relevant audience, knowledge diffusion remains a game of chance, consistently affected by both the broader structural problems and fragmentations of the current information and communication landscape and the pressures that affect the capacity of potential users.

Extending the Researcher's Sphere of Influence through Collaborative Engagement

The success of efforts around research translation, mobilization, and impact largely depends on the capacity to go beyond the academic model of diffusion. Publication (across all media and formats), just like commercialization, is a mode of diffusion that relies on interventions and systems dynamics that reside entirely outside of the sphere of control of researchers. As such, on the standard model, the role of researchers in the diffusion of their ideas is almost entirely passive beyond what happens "in the lab" (or the library), where the idea is generated.

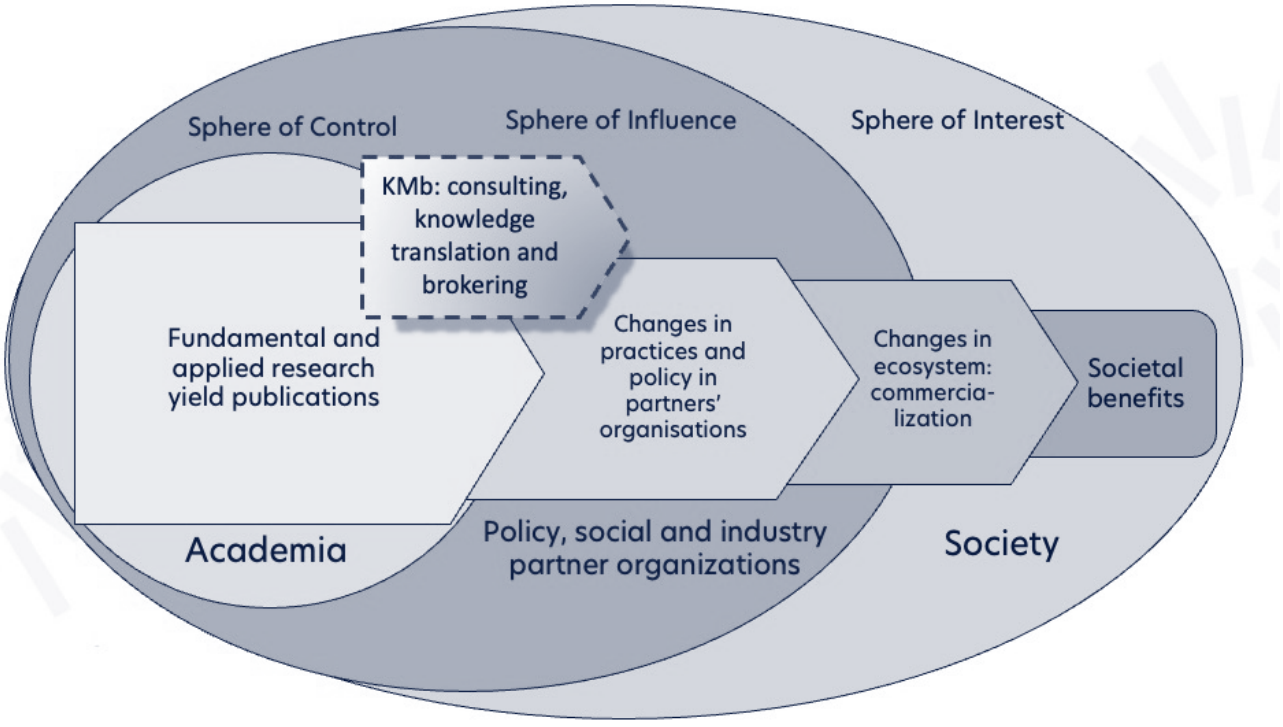

Figure 4: Linear Diffusion Model of Innovation

Newer models of impact and innovation emphasize the crucial role of collaborative engagement and partnership throughout the research and innovation process, which allows researchers to get input from prospective users about insights, evidence, and solutions they actually need and to

shape the way in which their ideas are received and used in these contexts. The figure below illustrates the point: the traditional diffusion model only accounts for the dissemination of research and impact pathways beyond the reach of the researcher. More recent models of impact, in contrast, focus on the active role of researchers in collaborative engagement at the interface with potential users (e.g., co-design, participatory research practices, deliberation and other forms of partnership-building and interface-creating activities).

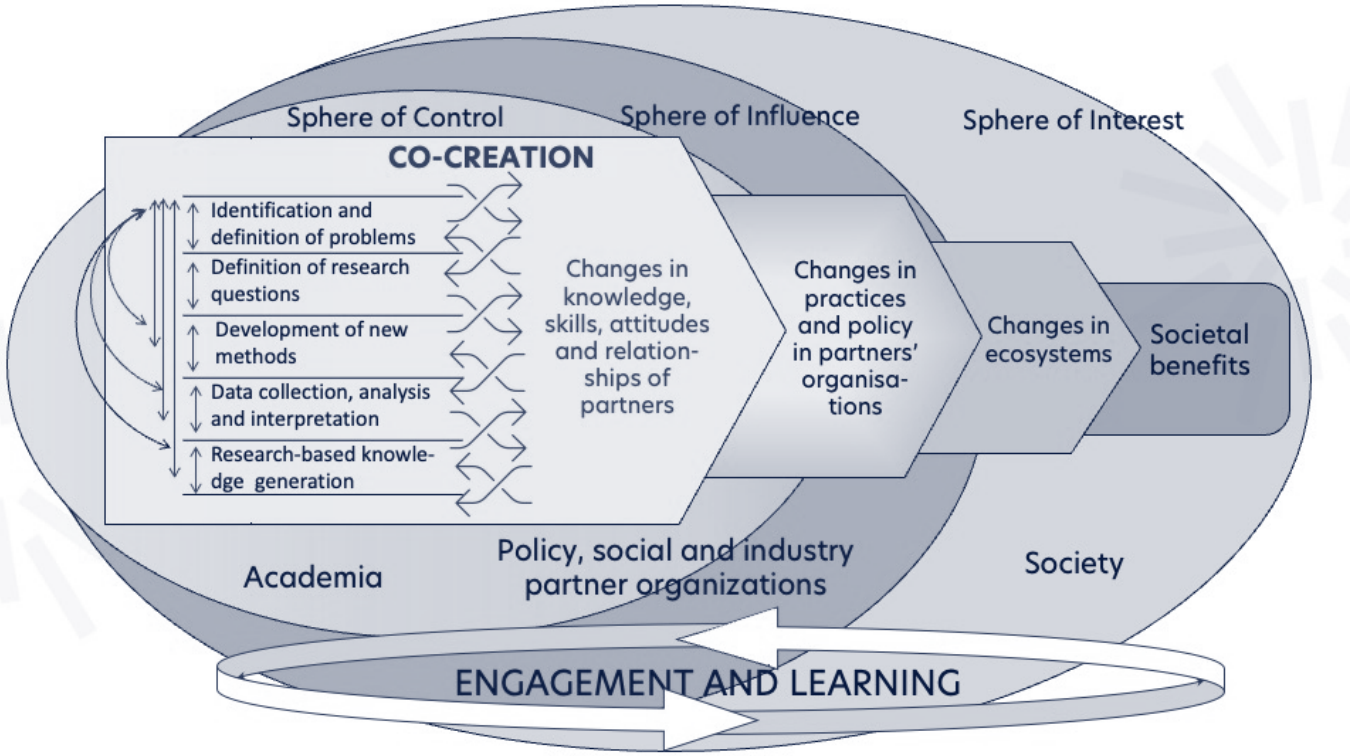

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Figure 5: Adapted from Belcher and Halliwell (2021).3

Health fields have in many ways shaped some of the collaborative practices—end-user integrated design, equity-based co-creation—that have seeped into the social sciences over the last three decades.[4] One clear implication of these newer approaches for SSH is that the capacity of researchers and their institutions to generate impact and innovation depends in part on their willingness to embrace and leverage collaborative engagement methodologies to make knowledge more useable by increasing its relevance to those who hold an interest in it. Although the question of who holds an interest in a specific research question or program is a rich one, especially when it comes to non-academic audiences, the capacity of researchers to guide, orient, and direct non-academic outcomes of their research (any outcome that is not within the direct research space) is intimately linked to their capacity to build relationships with prospective knowledge users—whoever they are—through collaborations that span all stages of the research. In theory at least,

3 Belcher and Halliwell's (2021) model includes 'partnerships' as part of research activities. In our model, partnerships create the interface between research and users. Co-creation and deliberation are methodologies that bolster the effectiveness of the interface.
4 Bowen, et al, 2013

the more connectivity in any or every stage of the research process, the wider the extension of the space within which researchers can directly shape how knowledge is used.

Seen in this light, effective dissemination is a challenge rooted primarily in the attitudes of academic researchers and their institutions toward collaborative engagement and other similar participative forms of knowledge dissemination. To improve how the valuable knowledges and insights that SSH researchers create meet the demand of communities and public institutions, especially in a digital age characterized by fragmented media landscapes, distraction, and information overload, researchers need to increase their immediate connectivity to the relevant ecosystem actors through engagement and collaboration.

The Collaborative Engagement Imperative

SSH's capacity to contribute to societal change and well-being goes beyond the production and diffusion of ideas and insights to relevant publics. As we have been arguing, it is also tied to engagement with prospective users through co-creation processes that require high levels of collaboration, and thus social and emotional intelligence. This is not just a matter of attitude or personality, but of methodology. The good news is that SSH research is well-positioned to engage user perspectives, especially given SSH's comfort with the *embeddedness* of knowledge and its development of methodologies and approaches to articulate the deep contextual factors that shape human behaviors and systems. Many aspects of primary and secondary research (surveys, interviews, focus groups, analysis, interpretation, and critique) within SSH are designed to make knowledge and, to an equal extent, values explicit. SSH methods can also be combined and modified to yield powerful analytic tools even in the most traditional disciplines, as in the recent development of experimental philosophy, energy humanities, digital and computational humanities, grounded history and normative theory, and discourse analysis, to name a few examples.

Co-Creation as Impact-Driving Methodology

New research methodologies within various SSH disciplines have been designed to draw directly on embedded knowledge to enhance the relevance and useability of research knowledge by engaging users and other interest-holders in the research process—a family of approaches called "co-creation." SSH researchers continue to develop effective collaborative co-design, co-development and co-implementation methodologies to support all aspects of research with communities, non-profits, and other actors in the social sector around various aspects of knowledge.

In a broad sense, co-creation is involved wherever knowledge flows intentionally across the SSH-community interface and can take a variety of forms. For instance, when considering how the project of a new light rail train may affect social determinants of health like the affordability of housing, economists, historians, anthropologists, sociologists and geographers may be involved in identifying indicators of vulnerability and displacement pressures, including neighbourhood-specific definitions of affordability, to determine which neighbourhoods might be at risk. This might also involve mapping rental arrangements, shared housing strategies, or historical-cultural ties, for instance, by capturing narratives of long-term residency or analyzing how transit investments interact with identity, belonging and social capital. Community-engaged initiatives and research projects that are rooted in processes carefully designed to support deep, trust-based, reciprocal collaborations have the power to bring together academics, experts from communities, and other

actors to generate insights together, holding space for diverse experiences, to grapple with uncertainty, and to co-produce new understandings of complex social challenges. Co-creation happens when researchers are engaged in community-focused partnerships and projects, including nonprofit and social sector organizations, government, health, indigenous communities, and K-12 schools. But, co-creation is also involved in research- and social innovation-focused experiential learning opportunities in which emerging researchers collaborate with partners around the processes of knowledge production and use.

Deliberation as a Catalyst for Evidence-Informed Policy

SSH-driven collaborative engagement can also drive impact in agile policy contexts. Because policy research is most effective when it engages the situated contexts that policies will address, SSH researchers may leverage a range of processes designed to make explicit the embedded values that necessarily shape policy decisions and the public reception of policy. This can take the form, for instance, of deliberative sense-making on available evidence available or a discussion of various scenarios in backcasting a vision. Crucial to deliberative engagement methodology is not just their potential in yielding new insights, but their ability to foster the vital and foundational awareness amongst policy actors—who ultimately wield the power to effect change—that their decisions are rooted in values and that they are more likely to succeed if they take in account the values of local communities. This is partly because the very nature of the social issues policy-makers are tasked to address depends in part on perceptions that are always situated and contextual, and can thus widely vary.

When the challenge one is tasked to address depends in part on people's experience of it and on a broader context, awareness of diverse points of view and of one's own is a crucial ingredient to formulating change and action. This is clear in the case of vaccine hesitancy and in a range of other areas: support for climate action depends on whether climate is perceived as a risk; support for mental health care or poverty alleviation depends on conceptions of illness, responsibility, and deservingness. In these and other cases, SSH researchers can help policy actors understand the deep, localized, and embedded knowledge and values of different communities and contexts, thereby avoiding the imposition of universalizing solutions that ignore local conditions and cultures. For instance, anthropologists might support the process of designing a vaccine policy by conducting research on a community's understanding of illness and immunity and who they trust for information about their health to inform a the creation of an effective messaging strategy. They might also identify other factors relevant to vaccine uptake, such as mobility patters, childcare constraints, work schedules, transportation costs, and documentation requirements that should be taken into account in the vaccine rollout.

The work of deliberation is vital. In an era of roiling populisms, which feed off dissensus and are now accelerating the rise of authoritarian responses to complex problems, transformations, uncertainties, and divisions, mobilizing expertise in diversity and consensus building is essential to protect democracy. Rather than imposing the most "efficient" solution in theory (efficient for whom?), or the one that is ideologically preferable to the party in power, evidence-informed deliberative processes can help to craft democratically robust solutions through processes of deliberation, engagement, and consensus formation. Here again SSH are still considerably underused. In addition to helping articulate the tacit norms, expectations and values that shape a context of interventions, SSH can leverage deliberative approaches to facilitate the integration of

multiple systems of knowledge into the definition, coordination, implementation and evaluation of policy, ideally leading to policies that better represent relevant communities. SSH researchers can open deliberative exchange spaces that mediate between governments, experts, and publics to help clarify and manage disagreements, to balance diverse perspectives, to work through uncertainty, and to build consensus around contentious issues.

Collaborative Engagement, Legitimacy and Accountability

When they are appropriately resourced—with funding, time, training and other forms of institutional support—SSH researchers working with community and or policymakers are more able to adopt collaborative, research-informed engagement processes that foster knowledge exchange (from academia to policy makers or social and nonprofit organizations), from research co-design, to knowledge co-development, and innovation-driving knowledge co-implementation. Clearly defined co-creation processes help clarify differences, manage uncertainties, and navigate complex issues in the most equitable, collaborative, and therefore democratically responsive manner possible. The result is greater accountability and legitimacy across the board. If research-informed solution and decision processes have engaged diverse stakeholders in robust dialogue, the solutions and decisions are liable to be more flexible, responsive, representative and legitimate, therefore sparking greater assent and readiness. If through collaborative engagement, research processes are perceived to be responsive, representative and valid to communities and the full range of affected groups and individuals, the outcome will be much closer to realizing the transparency and cohesion needed for durable solutions to complex problems.

Barriers to Connectivity

Despite some current initiatives and their even richer potential for contributing to societal progress and innovation, SSH are falling far short of public and social sector needs. Some argue that the problem is at least partly one of perception, that SSH's impact is inevitably diffuse, nonlinear, difficult to quantify and therefore bound to be misunderstood. But, as we saw above, in the relevant contexts this diffuseness can be mitigated through collaborative engagement. The real issue is SSH's overall capacity to connect.

Connectivity between SSH and society is crucial to public and social innovation and impact. Connectivity happens when knowledge and expertise can flow and knowledge is absorbed on all sides of a collaboration, as in the examples of co-creation, collaboration, and deliberation discussed above. As such, connectivity depends largely on the *capacity* for collaborative engagement, and thus on the deployment and implementation of deliberative and/or co-creative processes. When there is high connectivity, partners work together with few barriers to sharing knowledge, assets, and resources. There is low connectivity, however, when collaborations and networks are beset by frictions, disconnects, or difficulties in exchanging and co-creating knowledge. Low connectivity can be the result of ideological differences (e.g. methodological, epistemological, terminological, etc.), divergences linked to sector norms and expectations between partners, inadequate time or financial support, and more.

To fulfill their third mission, higher education institutions need to actively engage with society, beyond teaching and research, to apply knowledge, foster innovation, inform public policy, and

contribute to social, cultural, and economic development. In the SSH, unfortunately, the landscape of efforts to supply those who need research knowledge is unequal and riddled with gaps. Low connectivity prevents SSH from fulfilling their societal role as effectively as possible. The important questions then is: *why* is SSH research not as engaged with communities and public institutions as universities claim to want to be? and *How* can the interface between SSH and society be improved to mobilize currently untapped assets (talent, knowledge) and retrofit Canada's public and social innovation ecosystems with the SSH knowledge it needs in the twenty first century ?

Low Institutional Support

The Absence of Reliable Institutional Data

There are currently few bespoke instruments to assess levels of institutional support for collaborative engagement in SSH. This is partly a reflection of the fact that, even in the best cases, the data that higher education establishments collect on scholarly activities, when such data exists, can only offer a partial picture of the landscape. There are several reasons for this, especially when it comes to the way data about scholarly activities is collected. As discussed above, most assessment and, therefore, data collection frameworks use rubrics and criteria that continue to focus heavily on traditional scholarly output. More importantly, the data is neither publicly available nor designed to be useable outside of individual Departments and Faculties, which makes integrating it into a workable database problematic. In the end, accessing information on scholarly activities at large requires us to rely on the most reliable proxy we have for academic reality, e.g. the websites of academic departments.[5]

Relying On Individual Initiative Is Not A Viable Institutional Strategy

A systematic review of the content of individual SSH departmental websites at all Canadian universities reveals efforts around collaborative engagement in Canadian SSH research are uneven. Quantitatively speaking, most mentions of engagement-based SSH scholarship at the interface with the public and social sectors falls in the category of individual research initiative, publications or in the context of individual courses. By contrast, institutionalized programs that promote interface-creating and partnership-building activities and that are designed to build talent and incentivise engagement with society (e.g., community-focused research centres or experiential learning programs) are few. Even if they were evenly distributed, there would not be enough such programs to ensure that each Faculty has more than a handful, which means that most SSH departments do not benefit from infrastructure and/or programs that integrate collaborative engagement with non-academic partners.

These low levels of institutional support for collaborative engagement infrastructure and programming also help to explain why, when asked about their primary motivation for engaging in community-focused research activities, SSH researchers cite a sense of belonging to community

5 This is why a digital inventory approach was used in Lapointe, et al (2025), *Inventory of Current Approaches, Initiatives, and Practices in Canadian Academic Institutions to Foster the Engagement of the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts in the Science-Policy Interface*.

or the benefit of their students, rather than professional advancement or meeting their institution's engagement mandate.[6] Although a sense of personal and moral responsibility to others is certainly laudable, especially when such work is not met with inadequate institutional support, relying on it is amount to an institutional strategy. Indeed, the absence of a strategy and reliance on individual initiative in this regard may create or reinforce already existing inequities by disadvantaging more junior or equity-deserving faculty members who may be under various other pressures to secure tenure or promotion.

Disciplinary, Regional and Institutional Disparities

When it comes to SSH initiatives that do benefit from institutional support to build partnerships and create interfaces with public and social sector actors, they tend to be heavily concentrated in a small group of disciplines. Community-focused work is dominated by departments associated with Sociology, Criminology and Law (which includes social work) and Geography and Environmental Studies. At the interface with policy, the same two disciplines are only superseded by Public Health and Public Policy, Business and Economics, and Political Science and International Relations. There are also geographic and institutional disparities. In Canada, research-informed collaboration tends to be concentrated in the largest and wealthiest universities, and in the largest and wealthiest provinces (British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec). And while smaller and mid-sized universities tend to have a better track record engaging community, making the disparity between institution size and wealth less significant for community-facing collaboration than for policy-facing work, the distribution of resources and funding, e.g. through SSHRC grants, tends to favour bigger universities with proportionally lower engagement profiles.

Finally, problems with connectivity are also apparent in the fact that the challenge areas with which SSH research is currently engaging are unevenly distributed. For instance, Social Development and Education represent almost two thirds of activities at the interface with policy in Canadian universities. Other priority domains like Economic Development, Environment and Health account for another third. Given the complexity and scope of the challenges in these and other areas, it would seem vitally important for universities to be proactive rather than reactive in strategically pursuing partnerships and other forms of interface-creating research and knowledge activities. The same is true for engagement in the social space, where partnerships are overwhelmingly skewed towards organization delivering social services, as opposed to K-12 schools and health service, for instance.

Institutional Rhetoric: Putting Our Money Where Our Mouths Are

Connectivity issues at the interface between SSH and society crop up in the perceptions that SSH researchers have of the supports that are available to them through their institutions, as well. While faculty members tend to agree that SSH expertise is in demand and that engagement is an effective way to enhance the impact of their research, they also tend to believe their university is not intentional about supporting evidence-informed engagement activities. Interestingly, academic leaders are more positive and optimistic about both support and outcomes, which raises questions about which data is available to whom, and how it is being analysed and shared to

6 Lapointe & Boss (2023). The picture is similar for SSH research at the interface with policy. See: (Lapointe & Bélisle-Pipon, et al, (2025).

demonstrate impact. In fact, there is a patent information/communication gap when it comes to the support that is or is not available to faculty members around community engagement in Canadian universities. Researchers, for instance, tend to be unaware of support available in their university around knowledge-mobilization. Misperceptions or ignorance about those supports may be the result poor communication, but they could also indicate the fact that collaborative engagement is not perceived as enough of a priority for people to record the information.[7]

This lopsided reality—of individual researchers in a limited range of disciplines and regions doing the majority of research on a limited set of issues and without much support—is inconsistent with the increasingly common claim that universities make about their commitment to social impact and community engagement. It also does not reflect the richness and versatility of the types of expertise and skills SSH could contribute across the innovation ecosystem. It points to a lack of institutional infrastructure to incentivize and enlarge the pool of researchers and the range of disciplines doing this important work, and to the extent of missed opportunities for researchers and potential users of knowledge alike.

Shifting Academic Culture

Cultural Norms and the Publish-or-Perish Trap

One of the most significant barriers to increasing SSH's engagement with societal problems and challenges is academic culture, which is defined by a range of more or less implicit conventions and normative commitments that inform which kinds of research and outputs are deemed valuable. It includes ideas about which behaviors should be rewarded; who is and who is not an expert; how to spend time, money, and attention; which kinds of risk are acceptable and which are not; and how much tolerance or even space there is for breaking with reigning norms and values. Currently, the scholarly activities and achievements that are generally rewarded, heeded, expected, supported, and celebrated are not those that focus on the knowledge needs of people outside of individual disciplines.

These tacit conventions and values are also embedded in the institutional policies that are designed to steer researchers' efforts. Interestingly, there seems to be considerable agreement amongst researchers as to which aspects of academic cultures are problematic, with the "publish or perish" ethos cited as the primary barrier. This seems right. If peer-reviewed publication and other traditional outputs are treated as the main purpose of academic research, as well as the primary path to tenure, promotion, and high standing in a discipline, then the longer term, relational work necessary to engage deeply with policy processes and community innovation will be unattractive, especially as it may impede the pace of peer-reviewed publications academia typically rewards.

Moreover, in SSH disciplines, the epistemic and disciplinary norms that underpin the imperative to publish in peer-reviewed speciality journals and presses often revolve around an individualistic model of researcher-driven exploration. Collaborative engagement, whether through co-creation or deliberative processes, poses a deep challenge to this paradigm and its notions of good research,

7 See Lapointe and Boss (2023).

of who counts as an expert, and of which kinds and volumes of output are a mark of research success. What is needed to shift or at least broaden the scope of academic culture to make it more welcoming of different kinds of expertise, output, and research practices is thus considerable.

Institutional Levers for Cultural Change

Challenging and changing academic culture would require deep changes to universities at the institutional level. One way to streamline such change is to act directly on institutional mechanisms that reflect values and norms and which codify the kinds and approaches to research that are incentivised. An institution's capacity for supporting and incentivizing collaborative engagement at the interface with society is partly reflected in the policies, guidelines, and programs that determine the rules for awarding tenure, promotion, and salary increase, as well as the programs designed to support people along their academic career pathways.

An institution that displays high capacity and readiness for public and social innovation:

- adopts or adapts policies, guidelines, and programs to incentivize and reward interface-creating and partnership-building engagement. Capacity for innovation and impact is evidenced in holistic support for activities and practices that support collaborative engagement.
- approaches accountability with intelligence. Quantitative and qualitative data on impact-driving activities and practices is key for evaluating an institution's capacity to generate value for stakeholders through research and scholarship.
- fosters impact and innovation literacy. To participate meaningfully in impact-driving activities, individual researchers and trainees need to be able to articulate and communicate how their research contributes directly or indirectly to change and/or innovation in the real world. Developing impact literacy is part of creating the conditions for impact-driving scholarship.

Without a clear self-understanding of current capacity, institutions cannot develop and implement strategies to increase the impact of the research their community produces.

Inadequate Training

The Skill Demands of Collaborative Engagement

Doing and sharing research in collaboration with government, nonprofits, and other organisations outside of academia is a rewarding but challenging process that requires its own set of skills. Although some SSH researchers may have acquired relevant skills through their research or in other contexts, discipline-based academic training typically does not require emerging researchers to prepare to engage in such collaborative work. With few exceptions, SSH graduate programs encourage emerging researchers to master disciplinary norms that revolve around solo-authored research engaged with questions, problems, and methods that emerge from the literature in their discipline. This training is valuable and crucial to conducting primary and secondary research. But without additional skills-building around the demands of collaborative processes in partnered, impact-focused research at the interface with non-academic partners, the opportunity cost for emerging researchers can be considerable. The lack of those skills increases the level of effort

individuals need to deploy, thus making the prospect collaborative engagement unattractive. It may passively discourage engagement of partnerships that respond to questions or problems of interest to communities, nonprofits, or policymakers, whose concerns often differ dramatically from those of academics, or compromise success for those who nonetheless undertake such initiatives.

The range of skills needed for collaborative research engagement is wide. In addition to leveraging both broad and specialised disciplinary knowledge, it includes the technical knowledge of co-creation and deliberation methodologies, which is diverse, multifaceted and constantly evolving. For instance, depending on the context and relevant type of evidence or knowledge, collaborative engagement might revolve around a number of different processes which researchers must be equipped to plan and implement, including participatory research, co-design, idea or innovation labs, systems mapping, sense-making, citizen juries, consensus conferences, multi-criteria decision analysis, futures workshops, delphi processes, and more. At a higher level, collaborative research engagement requires the ability to plan and design research; recruit participants in ways that are inclusive, equitable, and representative; facilitate and translate knowledge; collect, analyze, and synthesise data in co-creative and deliberative settings; and engage participants in sense-making and reflection. Importantly, training for collaborative engagement should involve attention to the foundational soft skills associated with the high levels of social and emotional intelligence that collaborative contexts demand. The nature of the work involved in leveraging deliberative and co-creative processes to address societal challenges should be seen to require two subs-sets of skills: 1. the capacity to collaborate specifically in interdisciplinary and intersectoral contexts and, perhaps more importantly, 2. the ability to leverage an understanding of complexity and systems dynamics in the definition of and solution to societal problems, including in policy settings.

Skills to Navigate Interdisciplinary and Intersectoral Collaborations

There is broad evidence that work at the interface with community and policy actors requires interdisciplinary approaches and indeed, the participation of a wide range of expertise. These collaborations may also take the form of ideas- or innovation-labs that draw on methodologies that rely on interdisciplinarity as a conduit of good design. The expectation, in these contexts, is that the collaborative processes of deliberation and co-creation are intentionally structured to make the most of rich interdisciplinary expertise while mitigating the frictions that can arise when epistemic norms and methodological standards differ.

It is no secret, however, that there are major gaps in training around interdisciplinary collaboration in higher education, and especially at the graduate level, where disciplinary siloes tend to be erected. Even when trainees work in group settings, as part of labs or research teams, the focus is rarely interdisciplinary, and training, when it is available, typically revolves around discipline-specific research methods rather than the capacity to facilitate or even to participate effectively in interdisciplinary research collaborations. Because interdisciplinary research is not the norm, there are few opportunities or even a sense of urgency to think about the skills that might be required to lead interdisciplinary research that makes the most of disciplinary expertise.

By contrast, the recent increase of resources dedicated to experiential learning could enhance the capacity of universities to prepare trainees for intersectoral collaborations. Although the rationale cited for the implementation of experiential learning programming is typically the prospect of

increased graduate employability, the reason why students who participate in experiential learning are more employable is that they are given an opportunity to hone foundational skills that are generally useful for navigating different institutional and cultural settings. In particular, the creation of programs (e.g., Mitacs) that fund research partnerships that integrate trainees in a work environment provide for a direct experience of intersectoral research. How interns in these programs acquire the literacy to articulate their newly gained skills and reflect on them however remains a critical question. To reap the benefit of experiential learning that may happen in a number of different organizational contexts and sectors, not only for employability but for research at the interface with society, it is important to emphasize the transversal nature of these skills. Evidence shows that the best approach is to be intentional about skills articulation and metacognition when it comes to building competencies in experiential contexts.

Skills and Literacy to Navigate Complexity and Understand Systems Dynamics

Although meaningful collaborative partnerships can extend the sphere of control of researchers, they need to be informed by an understanding of the particular dynamics that underpin the diffusion of social and public innovation. Academic research does not organically flow into an ecosystem and the iterative processes through which basic research eventually yields innovation need to be intentional and appropriate in the context of application. The contexts in which social and public innovations are deployed are however complex, emergent, and unpredictable.

Being intentional about innovation processes in such conditions requires those involved to understand the systemic dynamics at play. The complexity and emergence inherent to the challenges that social and public innovations are designed to address however needs to be properly conceptualised and addressed:

- in research design, to identify root causes and to frame research questions properly;
- in knowledge production, by engaging the perspectives and experiences of ecosystem actors to develop solutions that will generate uptake; and
- throughout implementation, to leverage approaches to scaling that are adapted to social complexity and emergence.

Admittedly, the idea that the research enterprise needs to rely on high levels of literacy around systems dynamics and complexity is not well-established. But planning, evaluating, and managing impact requires a theory of change that is informed by the best available conceptual instruments, which neither the traditional innovation models, nor the entrepreneurial models that build on them, can provide.

Repositioning SSH within Canada's Innovation Ecosystem

The Social Sciences and Humanities disciplines possess critical yet underutilized capacities to address the complex societal challenges facing Canada. Issues such as climate change and energy transition, public health, housing and homelessness, political polarization and democratic backsliding, social and economic inequality, and technological disruption require insights into

human behaviour, systems dynamics, governance, culture, and values—domains in which SSH expertise is essential.

Despite this potential, SSH contributions to public and social innovation remain constrained by systemic barriers, outdated incentive structures, and insufficient institutional funding and supports. To position the Faculty as a leader in advancing social innovation, the following strategic priorities are recommended.

A national innovation strategy that seeks to optimize the federal investment in SSH research should focus on 3 key domains of action.

Enhance What is Already Being Done

- Increase resources for researchers using co-creation and deliberative methods
- Increase training and literacy in interdisciplinary collaboration, systems thinking, and theories of complexity
- Enhance institutional data systems and communication pathways to keep track of progress

Reform Institutions to Remove Barriers

- Transform academic culture and reward systems
- Reform funding, tenure, and workload structures to support engagement

Coordinate at a System-Level

- Develop and advance a system-level national strategy for SSH's role in public and social innovation, including through mission-oriented research
- Build relational, cross-sectoral, and inter-institutional infrastructure for community and policy engagement
- Intentionally broaden and diversify engagement across disciplines, partners, and regions, including through targeted funding initiatives and partnerships

The pathway to fully realizing SSH's potential is one of deep and sustained engagement with policy- and decision-makers, as well as with nonprofits and other organizations in the social sector. We have articulated some of the reasons why this potential is not being fully met. The current landscape of university-community/policy engagement is not structured to provide SSH researchers with the time, resources, and rewards it takes to form partnerships, work through connectivity challenges, build trust, and to do the other kinds of work that are required for success. For this to change, university culture must shift to revalue SSH's potential contribution and to encourage and support the kinds of activities that are necessary for SSH researchers to engage meaningfully with society.

Universities need to rapidly build out their capacity for social impact, which entails providing holistic and robust support for research activities and practices designed for social impact, rather than the much narrower forms of support that currently predominate. The first step in this direction is to develop clear policies, guidelines, and programs to incentivize and reward impact-focused research activities. Providing emerging and early career researchers with opportunities to develop

their understanding of how their research can be tailored for impact, and to develop the skills for collaboration and cross-sectoral collaboration that are essential for this kind of work.

But higher education institutions are not the only actors who should be challenged to step up. To the extent that they are organized into national and international associations, SSH disciplines also carry significant institutional and cultural weight. Those who shepherd these associations, in particular, may have a role in ensuring that SSH researchers and their institutions develop a shared understanding of how research can and should shape progress, and what success looks like when researchers endeavour not only to diagnose and assess but to work toward addressing real world problems. This understanding will likely vary by the needs and strengths of the disciplines, their institutions, and the communities they serve, but formalizing this understanding is a crucial step to demonstrating that a university is serious about collaborative engagement in SSH research practice. It also provides a foundation for researchers to pursue new kinds of research, with a clear understanding of the kinds of activities that are worth pursuing and will be supported and rewarded.

Structures of funding, tenure, teaching, and time allocation will also need to change to support community and policy engaged scholarship. SSH researchers, as noted above, say that they do not have enough time for community and policy-engaged research. This perception is likely related to the fact that researchers are incentivized by the values of academic culture, as embodied in tenure and promotion guidelines, to spend their time on other kinds of research, teaching, and service activities. Making space for "alternative" forms of research and community engagement will empower researchers to allocate more time to third missional research and knowledge mobilization activities.

Higher education institutions and other funding bodies will also have to commit to funding research for social and public innovation and impact alongside investigator-led research. The Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada has made significant strides in supporting interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral knowledge creation and collaboration. Research shows that these efforts directly shape how faculty pursue and present their research projects. But there is a persistent lack of clarity around what effective community-oriented research and knowledge mobilization looks like, which makes it difficult to measure the quality of cross-sectoral connections and the level of impact that a given project makes. To be effective, research funding needs to be based on clear criteria and guidelines and it needs to go beyond privileging new or more research activities as is the case in current funding models. Funding needs to move through a renovated innovation system comprised of shared criteria, definitions, models, and practices that lessen institutional constraints on researchers and foster collaborations that truly benefit community and policy partners. This will be a challenging process and calls for serious self-reflection on the part of university leaders and researchers about the goal and purpose of the academic enterprise in an era of mounting societal challenges and crises.

Developing new and more expansive, innovation- and SSH-appropriate models of assessment is an important step for changing academic culture. A reform of research assessment should be designed to provide clarity around what forms of research are desirable and effective, and a foundation for assessing success. This is challenging because the current picture of what SSH-driven community innovation and policy impact looks like is often vague or mired in quantitative metrics that cannot adequately capture the contributions that SSH can and does make. Creating

new assessment frameworks will also be an important step in moving community and policy-focused research away from researcher-centric models, individual initiative, and the sense of personal or moral responsibility that current drives a lot of this research, and toward career growth and recognition. Institutionalizing community and policy innovation in this way, moreover, is a matter of equity because it reduces the risks of departing from entrenched academic practice and pathways, ensuring that all SSH researchers have equal access to opportunities for career advancement through community/policy innovation and impact.

Recommendations for Institutions and Funders

1. Reposition SSH as Core Innovation Infrastructure

Current innovation ecosystems over-privilege STEM-centric, linear models and legacy approaches focused on commercialization. SSH must be framed not as supplemental but as foundational to systems-level innovation capable of addressing complex problems.

Actions for Institutions

- Adopt a formal vision statement positioning SSH as essential to the mission of the university and to public and social innovation.
- Embed SSH innovation literacy (e.g., co-creation, systems thinking, deliberation methodologies) across graduate curriculum, faculty onboarding, and public communications.
- Incentivize interdisciplinary SSH–STEM collaboration, not as an exception, but as a structural expectation.

Actions for Funders

- Increase funding for all SSH research.
- Develop funding regimes that require SSH-STEM collaboration.
- Shift funding priorities toward demand-driven, co-created research.
- Support multi-stakeholder, mission-oriented initiatives targeting national challenges.

2. Strengthen Institutional Capacity for Collaborative Engagement

Research impact is directly tied to *connectivity*—the quality of relationships, processes, and structures that link SSH research to community, policy, and social sector partners. Current engagement practices rely too heavily on individual initiative. Investing in connectivity infrastructure dramatically increases capacity to build trust-based, enduring relationships and socially embedded research programs.

Actions for Institutions

- Create or expand dedicated engagement infrastructure, such as:
  - A Faculty-level SSH Impact & Engagement Office.
  - Community partnership coordinators.
  - Support for project scoping, ethics navigation, and agreement templates.
- Offer seed funding for co-creation initiatives, enabling early-stage relationship-building with community, policy, and social sector actors.
- Establish recognition and reward pathways within tenure, promotion, and merit processes that recognize partnership-building, co-creation, and innovation-driving research.

Actions for Funders

- Formally recognize co-creation and deliberation as legitimate research methodologies in program descriptions and adjudication criteria.
- Expand programs that require researcher–community–policy co-design.
- Incentivize long-term partnerships, not only project-based collaborations.
- Fund the design and implementation of collaborative research *processes* (e.g., co-design workshops, citizen deliberations, policy labs), not only research *outputs*.
- Encourage methodological pluralism that integrates both social sciences and humanities expertise with technical and contextual knowledge.
- Encourages SSH research based in social innovation, design and living labs through new initiatives.
- Support the development of place-based, regional SSH social innovation networks linking academia, municipalities, nonprofits, and Indigenous organizations.

3. Shift Academic Culture and Incentive Structures Toward Connectivity

Many barriers to social and public innovation lie not with individual researchers but with institutional cultures that continue to reward primarily discipline-bound, publication-focused activity. The prevailing “publish or perish” culture undermines engagement with communities and public institutions by prioritizing academic outputs over societal outcomes. This disproportionately affects early-career and equity-deserving scholars. Traditional indicators of impact—publications, citations, media mentions—capture the intensity of research supply but provide limited insight into whether knowledge is used or useful, i.e. whether it meets a demand. When knowledge is not used, there is no impact.

Actions for Institutions

- Revise tenure and promotion criteria to explicitly reward collaborative engagement, e.g.:
  - Participatory research
  - Community-engaged scholarship
  - Knowledge co-production
  - Policy engagement and evidence-support activities
- Implement narrative-CV formats to help researchers articulate non-traditional impact.
- Recognize team-based and interdisciplinary work as core scholarly contributions.

Actions for Funders

- Develop assessment criteria and frameworks that value co-creation, policy impact, social transformation, and community engagement.
- Promote narrative or portfolio-based assessments emphasizing real-world outcomes.
- Reward evidence of institutional support for partnership-based research, such as workload recognition, tenure and promotion alignment, and dedicated support units.
- Revise funding opportunities to explicitly support connective tissue: partnership brokers, co-creation labs, deliberative methods, cross-sectoral networks, and engaged research infrastructure.
- Ensure that funding criteria do not inadvertently penalize researchers—particularly early career or equity-deserving scholars—who invest time in collaborative engagement.
- Encourage institutions to develop strategies and infrastructure for community and policy engagement, rather than relying on individual initiative.
- Link funding for graduate award holders to optional training opportunities on co-creation, facilitation, systems mapping, and deliberative methods.
- Support social-sector experiential learning (e.g., Mitacs-style models adapted for SSH).
- Upskill program officers and assessors to deal with new evaluation frameworks and criteria.

4. Build Skills for Collaborative, Systems-Based Problem Solving

Effective social innovation depends on skills that are not typically emphasized in traditional academic training, including facilitation, interdisciplinary collaboration, systems thinking, and impact literacy. Without targeted investment and mandatory programming, the capacity to conduct high-quality partnership research will remain uneven and fragile.

Actions for Institutions

- Integrate co-creation and deliberation methodologies into mandatory graduate training (e.g., design labs, citizen juries, multi-criteria analysis, systems mapping).
- Provide skills development opportunities focused on collaboration and innovation:
    - Impact literacy
    - Facilitation and stakeholder engagement
    - Interdisciplinary collaboration
    - Systems thinking and complexity literacy
- Expand experiential learning partnerships with social sector organizations, policy bodies, municipalities, and community groups.

Actions for Funders

- Fund training and capacity-building initiatives focused on co-creation, deliberation, and collaborative research design.
- Support learning-oriented program components that allow researchers and partners to reflect on what works, for whom, and under what conditions.
- Encourage the development of shared resources, communities of practice, and methodological guidance for partnership-based research.

5. Establish Data and Learning Systems to Track Impact

A major barrier is the absence of reliable institutional data on engagement activities, partnerships, and impact outcomes. Tracking this data enables actors to identify gaps, allocate resources strategically, and demonstrate public value to funders, government, and community partners.

Actions for Institutions

- Use shared frameworks to create an engagement activity registry documenting partnerships, co-creation projects, policy advising, and community-based research across all departments.
- Include a SSH Social Impact module in annual reports, highlighting outcomes, partnerships, and innovation case studies.

Actions for funders

- Coordinate national efforts to track SSH engagement and impact.
- Develop a common vocabulary, criteria, and evidence frameworks for assessing SSH contributions to public and social innovation.

6. Position SSH Faculties as a System-Level Connector

Canada's innovation ecosystem requires stronger coordination across sectors. Institutions can play an important regional and national leadership role by leveraging SSH expertise in systems design, facilitation, and social transformation.

Actions for Institutions

- Convene regional "SSH Social and Public Innovation Networks" with community, municipal, and policy partners.
- Align Faculty research strengths with mission-oriented initiatives (e.g., housing, climate adaptation, democratic resilience, AI governance).
- Serve as a hub for "social R&D" to support capacity-building (research, talent) in the nonprofit and public sectors.

Actions for Funders

- Use funding programs to foster cross-sectoral and cross-institutional networks focused on priority societal missions.
- Encourage continuity and scaling through phased or linked funding rather than stand-alone projects.
- Position the funding agency as a convenor and steward of a broader social innovation ecosystem, not solely as a grant administrator.

GLOSSARY

Capacity: The ability of an organization to perform work, or the level of an organization's capability to deliver services, programs, and products as part of fulfilling its mandate or mission.

Connectivity: A feature of a system that allows for knowledge, expertise, and resources to flow; connectivity is multilayered and multifaceted. It bridges organisations across all sectors in an innovation ecosystem and affects all zones of impact.

Connectivity Barriers: Structures, tendencies, or gaps that impede connectivity. They include institutional, disciplinary, and regional disparities or incapacities, limited data systems, and cultural incentives that hinder knowledge flow and partnership quality. These and other barriers reduce real-world impact potential.

Co-Creation / Co-Design / Co-Development / Co-Implementation: Collaborative methodologies that engage knowledge users and stakeholders at key points or throughout the research cycle—from problem framing to delivery—to increase relevance, usability, and legitimacy of outcomes.

Deliberation / Evidence-Support / Knowledge Exchange: Structured processes (e.g., citizen juries, consensus conferences, sense-making workshops) that reveal values, perspectives, and uncertainties to inform robust, democratically responsive policy and program decisions

EDI: An abbreviation for: ‘equity, diversity and inclusion’.

Experiential Learning: The acquisition of knowledge and skills through practice and upon reflection of a period of engagement, observation, and/or immersion. ‘Experiential learning’ and ‘work-integrated learning’ are often used interchangeably. An experiential-learning partnership is a community-based collaboration between an organization and a higher education institution that revolves around the hosting, facilitating, and supporting of one or more students involved, for instance, in program, service, or project delivery.

Innovation: A new way of doing, framing, knowing, or thinking that creates value or addresses and problem or challenge. Innovation is an outcome of knowledge use insofar as it is the result of a series of actions or steps designed to create, improve, apply, or implement knowledge, research, evidence.

Innovation ecosystem: The multilayered and multifaceted collection of interconnected institutions, organizations and people through which the resources, talent, and information that support, interact with, and affect innovation flow. (see also: zones of impact)

Innovation Process: A series of actions or steps designed to create, improve, or implement ways of doing, framing, knowing, or thinking that are intended to create value.

Knowledge Mobilization: An umbrella term encompassing a wide range of activities relating to the production and use of research results, including knowledge synthesis, dissemination, transfer, exchange, and co-creation or co-production by researchers and knowledge users (source: SSHRC).

Research and Development (R&D): The planned creative work aimed at new knowledge or developing new and significantly improved goods, programs, and services. This includes both basic research and applied research and development. The latter refers to the use of research and practical experience to produce new or significantly improved goods, programs, services, or processes.

Skill: An aptitude, competency, or ability broadly construed.

- Foundational skill: A broad range of abilities and knowledge understood to be essential to employability and citizenship, and generally associated with social and emotional intelligence as well as cognitive literacy. These include critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, self-management, intercultural competence, and effective communication.
- Technical skill: a domain-specific skill that is usually associated with applied training.

Social impact: The measurable outcome of the products, programs, services, ideas, etc., of an individual, organization, or other collective, that are created and delivered to address a specific social need. It is predicated on specific activities or outputs (e.g. programs, services) and their outcomes.

Social innovation: A phrase used in multiple contexts to refer to new ideas, services, processes, or frameworks intended to meet social needs or create impact for the public benefit. Here we make a distinction between innovation in the social sector that follows traditional logics and innovation for social transformation, which targets systemic societal issues and the wicked problems that create these systemic issues. From a social innovation standpoint, social transformation is an intentional process through which transformational change is effected across social systems to address emerging social crises and global challenges. Transofirmative social innovation happens as a result of coordinating the actions of multiple stakeholders in a system toward a collective goal.

Social research and development (social R&D): Evidence-based methods and practices intended to acquire, absorb, and/or utilize knowledge, often to create or improve processes, products, and/or services in the social sector.

Social sector: An umbrella term denoting the organizations that identify with and operate for the public benefit, including co-operatives, non-profits, registered charities, social enterprises/B corporations, or unincorporated grassroots or community groups. It is sometimes referred to as the “third sector”, in contrast to what has traditionally been labeled the private and public sectors. Recently, the emergence of “social enterprise”, i.e., a for-profit business model embracing social and/or environmental goals, has made traditional boundaries between sectors in mixed economies more porous.

SSH: Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts disciplines. Statistics Canada groups all non-STEM disciplines together: Business, Humanities, Health, Arts, Social science, and Education (BHASE).

Supply-Driven vs. Demand-informed Models

- **Supply-Driven**: Research questions, outputs, and success criteria defined primarily by academics; impact depends on post-hoc diffusion.
- **Demand-informed**: Research co-defined with knowledge users; methods, success metrics, and implementation planned collaboratively to meet real needs.

Talent: in this context, 'talent' means the same as 'HQP': those with skills acquired as part of advanced (graduate, MA, Ph.D.) training in any academic discipline.

Zones of Impact: Knowledge use and research practices are shaped by the specific knowledge needs of specific knowledge users in different zones across the innovation ecosystem. The framework proposed here was initially used to organise evidence generated through a review of the literature guided by the following questions:

- What processes underpin knowledge use at the science-society interface?
- What are the barriers to knowledge use and/or innovation in the different zones of impact at the science-society interface?
- What are the drivers of knowledge use and/or innovation in the different zones of impact at the science-society interface?
- What skillsets and know-how are required of individuals working in the different zones of impact at the science-society interface to support these processes?

The processes involved in ensuring that the relevant knowledge is properly used by the right people to produce the desired impact and innovation is examined in *Skills for Inclusive and Collaborative Innovation* (Lapointe and Propst, 2023).

ZONES OF IMPACT	
Economy	Universities, colleges, governments, and industry cooperate to create technology-driven economic growth. Research generates new ideas, and innovation is typically the result of "commercialization", "technology transfer", and similar activities that benefit from the support of industry liaisons and technology transfer offices who act as intermediaries to push out research and pull in investment partners.
Policy	Knowledge and expertise needed for policy making may extend to any aspect of HEI-based research and is increasingly expected to incorporate lived experience and stakeholder input. The co-creation processes through which knowledge is intentionally mobilized for policy making often takes the form of "evidence-support" and "knowledge exchange" deliberation.

Social Sector	The social sector includes all organisations whose purpose is defined in connection to societal well-being. Knowledge mobilisation in the social sector generally aims at supporting practitioners (e.g. medical practitioners, educators, social services providers) by ensuring that they have access to the most recent research in the relevant fields: social, ethical, cultural, legal, educational, and medical. Partnerships between HEIs and social sector organisations also revolved around other types of "community-engagement" activities. At the level of communities, knowledge needs of social sector organisations and municipal governments often overlap.
Social Transition	Social transformation is an intentional process through which systemic change is effected to address emerging social crises, wicked issues, and global challenges. Social transformation happens as a result of coordinating the actions of multiple stakeholders (industry, society, economy and policy) toward a collective goal. For this reason, social transformation revolves around processes that involve the co-design and co-creation of solutions such as those applied in community-based innovation-, design-, or living "labs".

References

The evidence and arguments for this white paper were produced through a series of research project funded by SSHRC and Mitacs , the results of which are available for review.

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