

Innovation commons: the ‘raw ingredients’ of innovation

Innovation Strategies for Wales



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THE LEARNED SOCIETY OF WALES**



The Learned Society of Wales is currently convening a programme of activities to help inform and improve innovation policies and practices in Wales.

This is a timely programme given the publication of the BEIS [Innovation Strategy for the UK](#), the [Advanced Research and Invention Agency Bill](#), and the increasing importance of a place-based agenda. The [HM Treasury's Comprehensive Spending Review 2021](#) makes a strong commitment to increasing R&D funding to £20 billion by 2024-25, a 35% increase on current funding levels.

The forthcoming UK Government White Paper on Levelling Up will also outline a plan to ensure that an increased proportion of government spending on R&D over the next three years is invested outside the Greater South East of the UK. If achieved, this will see several billions of additional funding outside the golden triangle and go a long way to addressing the previously identified deficit, as noted in Thomas Forth and Richard A.L. Jones's [The Missing 4 Billion: Making R&D work for the whole UK](#) report for Nesta, 2020. The [Nurse Review of the research, development and innovation organisational landscape](#) will also likely prompt further shifts in BEIS policy.

At the same time, the Welsh Government is reviewing its innovation policies and is currently developing a new integrated cross-governmental strategy for innovation. The [Tertiary Education and Research Bill \(Wales\)](#) is progressing through the Senedd, proposing reforms to the regulation and funding of post-16 education and research under a new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (C-TER), which would supersede the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW).

Wales is also adapting to a funding landscape without European Structural Funds, which had been significant in developing Wales's research and innovation capacity and collaborative potential. The new Wales Innovation Network (WIN) will work to leverage the diversity of Welsh institutions through collaborative activity.

In March 2022, the Society hosted the fourth in the series of roundtable discussions, which explored the idea of 'innovation commons' and the possible application of the concept in the context of Wales.

All roundtable sessions are conducted under Chatham House rules, and this is the anonymised and unattributed report of key points from the fourth discussion.

The concept of innovation commons

The innovation commons is a new theory of innovation, which in particular considers the initial emergence of new innovative activity – ‘where do new ideas come from?’ – which emphasises the processes of cooperation and resource pooling, as preconditions for how classically understood industrial innovation begins to happen. The concept of innovation commons is thus defined as a space and a means of sharing data, knowledge and information, including that which value has yet to be determined, in order to facilitate learning and discovery. Innovation commons thus provides insights into a proposed solution to the challenge of promoting innovation – a mechanism to spark new innovation rather than to address issues that may occur further along the innovation journey, such as market failure or challenges of scaling.

At the heart of innovation commons theory, is the recognition that in order for innovation to happen, resources need to be shared in a space or via a network or institution which enables people to cultivate connections and trust, and to play with the ideas in a more spontaneous way. The invited speakers recognised the value of the innovation commons, including as a ‘cultural’ solution to innovation issues and appreciated how it draws on the long tradition of ideas emerging from the ‘hobby’ aspects of roles – the ‘Friday afternoon experiments’- and the informal conversations that occur both inside and outside of work. One of the key ingredients of intangible capital within innovation commons was said to be trust between individuals that can be key in them cooperating with each other. For example, lessons learned from [EU Smart Specialisation programme](#) (an innovation-led territorial development), indicated the [disparity in the level of trust](#)

[between various regions within EU](#), which affected the ability of low-level trust regions to progress with the development and implementation of the innovation.

Nurturing innovation commons and policy implications

The focus on building innovation through the social and cultural elements of the innovation commons was seen as a compelling idea by most of the participants of the session. This insight was complemented by the recognition of the opportunity that the commons approach provides for creating an intersection of domain specific knowledge (‘vertical knowledge’) with place based and local information (horizontal knowledge). This was seen to have significant potential, particularly as a means of engaging public sector services and organisations. As the public sector often has early sight of big problems, bringing their knowledge into an innovation commons space could facilitate the search for impactful solutions. Open-source data was also highlighted as an important resource for unlocking this potential, and the discussion reflected that this space afforded a stronger role for social science and humanities researchers within innovation activity to help address societal challenges. Here again, the role of the public sector was seen as crucial both in terms of a repository of much data resource and in freeing up these data. The arguments for opening up data to underpin and ‘feed’ innovative activity has been the [subject of valuable recent academic work](#).

The Relevance of Innovation Commons for Cardiff Capital Region

Part of the roundtable discussion centred on how relevant the innovation commons approach was for activity being undertaken in the Cardiff Capital Region (CCR). CCR’s goals are defined as being Connected, Competitive,

Resilient. It is a connector of people, their ambitions and opportunities, a catalyst for continuity investment, underpinned by a focus for creating the conditions where businesses and people are best equipped to embrace the future.

CCR uses a broad definition of innovation and has worked to identify the local capitals which it could support and harness to increase innovation activity and impact. This more granular approach with evidence-based information about the precise comparative advantages in the region, has resulted in fewer, but more robust and competitive clusters. Each of these clusters may be viewed in terms of its own innovation commons properties and potentials. The cluster groups operate with a networked leadership, and, along with internal strengths, there are emerging areas of potential at the intersections of the clusters. CCR was seen to have disrupted existing practice to some extent, as the approach was a new way of working which has prioritised connecting people, organisations and information and taking a long and patient view of innovation.

Another example of CCR adopting an approach similar to the innovation commons is the [Infuse](#) programme, which brings innovation capability into public sector through six months training programme aiming at developing skills and capacities of the local authorities, predominantly in the areas of decarbonisation, data and supportive communities. By investing in innovation skills, local authorities are more able to engage with other innovation actors, creating more potential for the development of solutions.

Where does innovation commons happen?

The discussion also considered the locations that lend themselves to supporting a

commons approach. University campuses were identified as an existing example of a commons space where people collaborate on various research projects, develop trust within these relationships, which in turn facilitates a more collaborative and open environment from which the innovative ideas could grow. It is this intangible capital that is crucial to cultivating the environment and culture of the innovation commons.

[Innovation districts and knowledge quarters](#) were also considered as physical environments which could support an innovation commons. A promising example was seen to be emerging in Manchester where the University of Manchester has been redeveloping the old UMIST site in the city centre to create [ID Manchester](#). As places and communities where spontaneous interactions can happen, these spaces do bring many benefits with their city centre locations. However, there are also disbenefits to these locations, as it can be a challenge to create a wider sense of belonging and inclusion. The role of the university as convenor and ‘events manager’ can be important here. The real estate aspects also bring commercial pressures and expectations.

Although Wales has yet to develop an innovation district or knowledge quarter, its science parks do not follow the isolated ‘gated community’ model and interact more with their local communities, as [M Sparc demonstrated, and Sbarc | Spark, the world’s first social science park, has been developed with collaboration at its centre](#). There could be scope for Wales’s science parks to more fully explore the potential of innovation commons to further their impact.

Innovation commons can also be facilitated by a network and/ or forum approach, creating spaces for people to connect with others, and to share information. The unrootedness of

such networks may bring advantages in terms of inclusion and agility. Network membership would change over time as new connections are forged and move into other collaborative spaces. Networks could also provide a valuable opportunity to reconnect, as well as make new connections, as we emerge from the coronavirus pandemic experience. A previous roundtable discussion considered the important role of networks, and [Research Innovation Scotland was seen as a particularly successful example of impactful connection making](#).

The challenges for policy and practise of innovation commons

Although the idea and potential of innovation commons was mainly welcomed by the roundtable participants, there were some concerns and challenges noted in discussions. The main two questions concerned the ability to which innovation could or should be designed, and the challenge for the main funding bodies for innovative activity to allow the space for failure. Given that many innovative ideas [stem from 'down time' rather than salaried responsibilities](#), making the right space for people to innovate was seen as a major challenge. Equally, it was acknowledged that the move away from a current heavy emphasis on metric-driven system within the funding bodies may be a difficult cultural shift, albeit the voices of optimism were also raised about the possible ways to absorb some of the costs related to

allowances for failure. These include developing a portfolio of activity in order to spread risk and the inclusion of initiatives that generate returns on investment, such as is the intention of the CCR.

Innovation Commons as narrative 'cohesion' for Wales innovation policy

The emphasis on the cultural and environmental aspects of innovation within the commons approach was seen as a potential opportunity for Wales. Explicit acknowledgement of the commons as a central component of innovation strategy offers a window to reframe Wales's innovation narrative and to create a new story about how innovation happens in Wales, as well as the results of that innovation.

As has been observed previously, Wales's innovation potential does not easily translate into impact. This could be due to a lack of connectivity and networks between various actors and groups within innovation ecosystem in Wales. Innovation commons thus was seen as a means of connecting interfaces and a 'missing link' for bringing together the disconnected innovation actors and institutions in Wales. In these regards, there was a positive view of how investment in the skills, data and connectivity of innovation commons could usefully complement and extend the potential impact of tailored and targeted [investment in specific clusters of innovation](#).

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