

Industrial Strategy and Missions

The role of social sciences in the ISCF

IRC Report No 034

Executive Summary

This report evaluates the role of social sciences in the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund (ISCF) and its implications for the development of the new UK industrial strategy, ["Invest 2035: the UK's Modern Industrial Strategy."](#) The primary aim of this project is to enhance our understanding of how social sciences contribute to mission-oriented approaches in industrial strategy, particularly in the context of the ISCF.

The ISCF was established to address significant societal challenges through mission-oriented industrial policies. This report captures key learnings from the ISCF and prepares for the delivery of the new industrial strategy, which aims to tackle pressing global challenges through a mission-led approach.

The research employs two main approaches: a structured literature review on mission-oriented innovation and industrial policy programs, and an evaluative analysis of the ISCF. The literature review identifies best examples of mission-oriented policy initiatives, key stages in mission development (mission formulation, mission design, and mission implementation), and highlights the role of social sciences in each of them. The evaluative analysis gathers evidence from the ISCF and its evaluations, focusing on how social sciences contribute to mission development within the fund. It employs different qualitative data methodologies linked to keyword analysis.

The findings underscore the critical role of social sciences in defining and structuring complex societal challenges. Social sciences ensure that mission-oriented projects address real-world issues effectively by encouraging public participation, iterative learning, and adaptation. The ISCF serves as a case study illustrating the importance of social sciences in mission-oriented policy development.

The analysis reveals that social sciences should be a core principle in mission-oriented industrial policies. The ISCF demonstrates the value of social sciences in implementing mission-oriented policies, although it is not always prominently featured in assessment reports. The report recommends enhancing the role of social sciences in each step of developing mission-oriented policies, including the creation of guides, toolkits, or playbooks to support their integration.

Among the key recommendations:

Enhance the Role of Social Sciences: The report emphasises the importance of integrating social sciences into mission-oriented industrial policies. It recommends that the social sciences should be a core principle in the development and implementation of these policies.

Develop Guides and Toolkits: To support the integration of social sciences, the report suggests creating guides, toolkits, or playbooks. These resources would provide guidance on how to consider the role of social sciences in the formulation, design, and implementation of different grand challenges (missions).

Improve Evaluation Methods: The report highlights the need for better evaluation methods to ensure accurate assessments of project viability and outcomes. This includes setting up robust data collection systems and feedback loops to make necessary adjustments based on evaluation results.

Address Regional Disparities: The report calls for addressing regional disparities in funding to ensure that all areas receive equitable support. This aligns with the government's "levelling up" agenda.

Streamline Approval Processes: To expedite funding allocation and reduce bureaucratic delays, the report recommends streamlining approval processes.

Encourage Collaboration: The report suggests fostering greater collaboration between stakeholders, including public and private sectors, academia, and civil society. This would enhance the effectiveness of mission-oriented policies and ensure broad support and legitimacy.

Adaptation and Learning: The report underscores the importance of continuous learning and adaptation in mission-oriented policies. It recommends using insights gained from monitoring and evaluation to adapt and enhance policies over time.

Background

This project aims to contribute to increasing our understanding of the role of social science in mission-oriented approaches to industrial strategy. To achieve this, we strive to capture learnings from the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund (ISCF) and prepare for the delivery of the new industrial strategy: [Invest 2035: the UK's Modern Industrial Strategy](#), published on 23 June 2025 by the UK Government. This new industrial strategy approach, as depicted by the UK government, aims to be mission-led in tackling some of the most pressing global challenges. In anticipation of the implementation of the new UK Industrial Strategy and the development of ESRC's upcoming Strategic Delivery Plans, we aim to contribute to the debate by analysing:

- » The different stages of mission development
- » The role and need for social science in the development of missions and an Industrial Strategy
- » How UKRI funds missions and the role of social science research in tackling global challenges.

Approach and Case Selection

The research examines two main approaches to evaluate mission-oriented industrial policy design and development. First, it conducts a structured literature review on mission-oriented innovation and industrial policy programs to identify key stages in mission development, which

informs the search for exemplary policies and highlights the role of social sciences. Second, it gathers evaluative evidence from the UKRI Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund (ISCF), which tackled significant societal challenges aligned with the 2017 UK Industrial Strategy's four themes: clean growth, ageing society, future mobility, and artificial intelligence/data economy. The analysis focuses on how social science contributes to mission development within the ISCF, considering fund-level evidence and specific ISCF projects considered significant in the evaluation reports.



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Thank you

The Innovation & Research Caucus

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About the Innovation and Research Caucus

The IRC supports the use of robust evidence and insights in UKRI's strategies and investments, as well as undertaking a co-produced programme of research. Our members are leading academics from across the social sciences, other disciplines and sectors, who are engaged in different aspects of innovation and research system. We connect academic experts, UKRI, IUK and the ESRC, by providing research insights to inform policy and practice. Professor Tim Vorley and Professor Stephen Roper are Co-Directors. The IRC is funded by UKRI via the ESRC and IUK, grant number ES/X010759/1. The support of the funders is acknowledged. The views expressed in this piece are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the funders.

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