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SURVEYING THE SOCIAL INNOVATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE IN HONG KONG
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PROFESSOR RICHARD HAZENBERG, UNIVERSITY OF NORTHAMPTON
DR NORAH WANG & DR YANTO CHANDRA, THE HONG KONG POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY
PROFESSOR ALEX NICHOLLS, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Photo by Colin & Linda McKie

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FOREWORD

I am pleased to present this research report entitled 'Surveying the social innovation and higher education landscape in Hong Kong'. It forms part of the Building Research Innovation for Community Knowledge and Sustainability (BRICKS) project, commissioned by the British Council and funded by the Hong Kong government's SIE Fund. BRICKS is a unique project that aims to find innovative solutions to social challenges in Hong Kong, by strengthening collaboration between higher education institutions (HEIs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), social enterprises and other organisations. The research presented in this report is a key step towards fulfilling that aspiration.

HEIs have a crucial role to play when it comes to finding responses to complex global and local challenges. To meet this demand, they must reimagine their function as centres of knowledge and leadership for the future. This research is ground-breaking, in that it presents a detailed picture of the HEI social innovation ecosystem in Hong Kong for the first time, and it is the first of its kind in Asia. It will act as a baseline to understand the challenges facing universities in relation to connecting and collaborating with each other and the community on social innovation through their research, teaching and engagement. The framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), agreed by all nations, underscores the importance of this

agenda globally, and the British Council, who are committed to supporting the sharing of knowledge and insights internationally, welcomes this report as a key milestone.

This research indicates some very positive trends in relation to social innovation in Hong Kong. There are examples of how social innovation is already addressing some of the critical challenges we face today, such as an ageing society, skills development, housing and health. However, success stories from around the world tell us that collaboration is key to unlocking the potential of social innovation, and these findings highlight some systemic barriers in Hong Kong affecting collaboration in this field, such as the way research funding is administered, and the competition between HEIs.

So, while there is significant work already happening in this arena in Hong Kong, and strong interest in social innovation from researchers and students alike, it is also clear that much more needs to be done. The report's authors have outlined several key recommendations that we hope will make a significant contribution to shaping the debate around social innovation policy and practice in Hong Kong, and further afield, in the years to come.

Jeff Streeter

Director, British Council in Hong Kong

1. SOCIAL INNOVATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN HONG KONG

'Surveying the social innovation and higher education landscape in Hong Kong' is a key report commissioned as part of the British Council's Building Research Innovation for Community Knowledge and Sustainability (BRICKS) project. The objective of the BRICKS project, which is funded by the Hong Kong government's Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship Development Fund (SIE Fund), is to build capacity and foster collaboration on social innovation between HEIs, NGOs, social enterprises and other organisations working at the frontline of public service delivery in Hong Kong. This research directly relates to this aim, by seeking to explore the barriers and enablers of collaboration to achieve social innovation primarily within/between HEIs in Hong Kong, but also with NGOs and other stakeholders. The research, therefore, explores the following aim and sub-aims:

Research Aim: to understand the knowledge, capacity and future ambitions of the Hong Kong academic community in relation to SI. How is this shaped by barriers and enablers at the following three levels?

- Systemic level: cultural norms, traditions and incentive structures that mediate inter-HEI collaboration.

- Institutional level: behaviours and attitudes of faculty and staff in HEIs towards collaboration.

- Practice-level: frontline knowledge of how to collaborate in the delivery of social innovation initiatives.

The research adopts a sequential mixed-method research approach to data collection, comprising five stages: an in-depth literature review, an online survey, semi-structured interviews, ecosystem mapping and data triangulation. The study is of particular importance, given that, to date, there is no baseline data in relation to social innovation in Hong Kong's higher education sector. Figure 1 illustrates the research design (including sample sizes where applicable).

1	**In-depth literature review** Explore global and local literature in relation to social innovation
2	**Online survey (n = 52)** Capture data on academics working on social innovation in Hong Kong HEIs
3	**Semi-structured interviews (n = 17)** Explore perceptions of multi-stakeholder groups on the Hong Kong social innovation ecosystem
4	**Ecosystem mapping** Map research, teaching and knowledge exchange in the Hong Kong social innovation ecosystem
5	**Triangulation of data** Triangulate the data from stages one to four into a cohesive analytical discussion

Figure 1 – BRICKS research design

Data has been gathered from a total of 52 survey responses, and 17 interviews with 22 participants. Five of the 22 interview participants also participated in the online survey, which brings the total number of unique 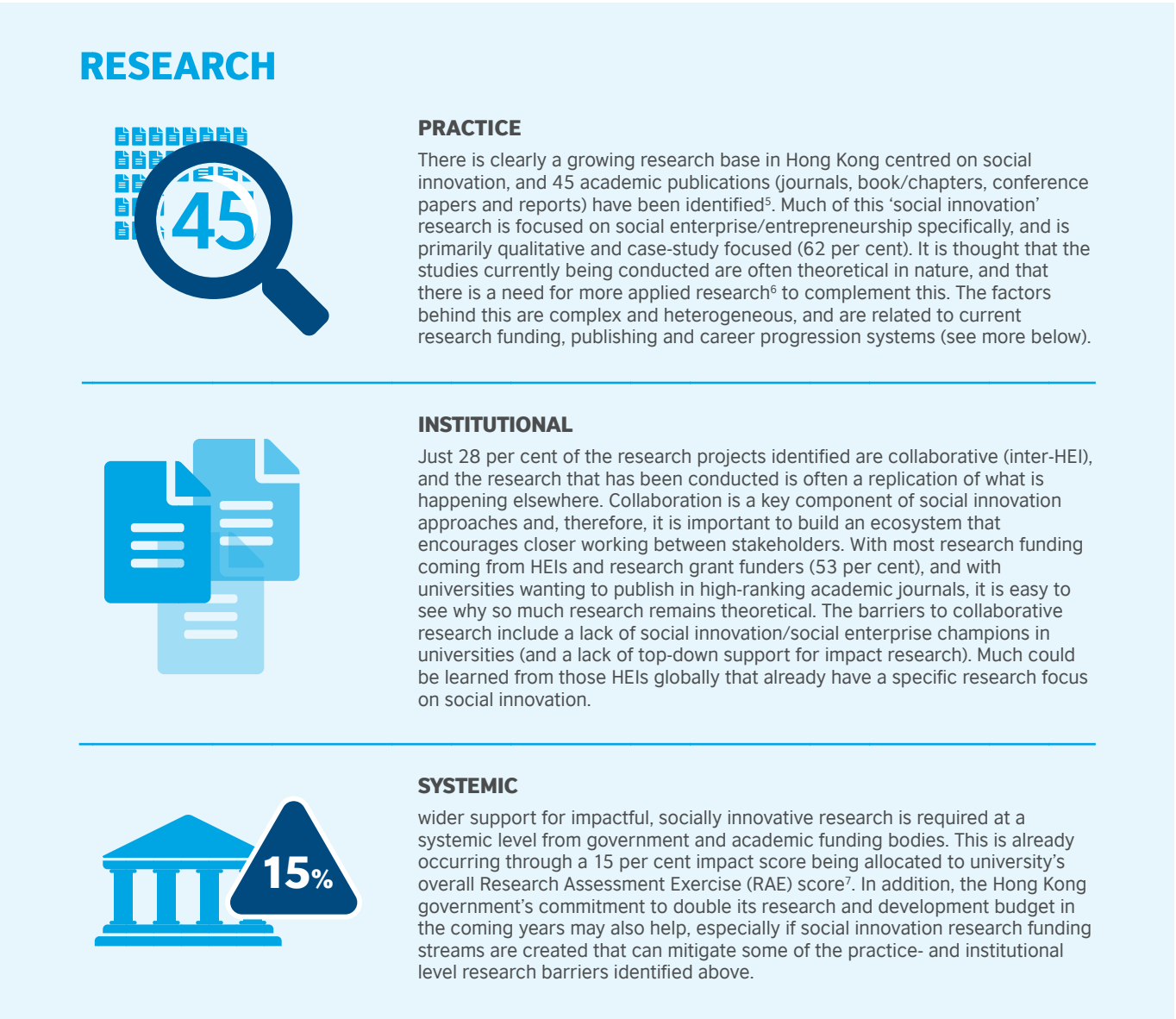individuals who have participated in the research to 69. The research has engaged all eight publicly-funded HEIs in Hong Kong.

2. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Through the quantitative and qualitative data gathered, this report presents a picture of the social innovation ecosystem in Hong Kong, with a specific focus on higher education and the role that universities can have in creating social value through research and teaching, as well as through knowledge transfer and community engagement. The main finding is that social-innovation-focused research and teaching is growing in Hong Kong. This should be viewed in relation to the global trend, where we are see growth in academic interest in relation to social innovation. Indeed, the emergence of specific research centres and institutes at universities focusing on social innovation and related issues worldwide (including the Centre for Social Impact, Australia; the Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship, University of Oxford, UK; the Centre for Social Innovation, University of Cambridge, UK; and the Center for Social Innovation, Stanford University, USA)[1] illustrates this. There has also been a growth in conferences that specifically focus on social innovation (including the annual International Social Innovation Research Conference[2]) or that have streams related to it[3]; whilst the rise of Ashoka U Changemaker Campuses[4] is also pushing the teaching agenda in relation to social innovation. In summary, the key findings to emerge from this research are detailed below, in relation to the three tiers of analysis (systemic, institutional, practice).

RESEARCH

PRACTICE
There is clearly a growing research base in Hong Kong centred on social innovation, and 45 academic publications (journals, book/chapters, conference papers and reports) have been identified[5]. Much of this 'social innovation' research is focused on social enterprise/entrepreneurship specifically, and is primarily qualitative and case-study focused (62 per cent). It is thought that the studies currently being conducted are often theoretical in nature, and that there is a need for more applied research[6] to complement this. The factors behind this are complex and heterogeneous, and are related to current research funding, publishing and career progression systems (see more below).

INSTITUTIONAL
Just 28 per cent of the research projects identified are collaborative (inter-HEI), and the research that has been conducted is often a replication of what is happening elsewhere. Collaboration is a key component of social innovation approaches and, therefore, it is important to build an ecosystem that encourages closer working between stakeholders. With most research funding coming from HEIs and research grant funders (53 per cent), and with universities wanting to publish in high-ranking academic journals, it is easy to see why so much research remains theoretical. The barriers to collaborative research include a lack of social innovation/social enterprise champions in universities (and a lack of top-down support for impact research). Much could be learned from those HEIs globally that already have a specific research focus on social innovation.

SYSTEMIC
wider support for impactful, socially innovative research is required at a systemic level from government and academic funding bodies. This is already occurring through a 15 per cent impact score being allocated to university's overall Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) score[7]. In addition, the Hong Kong government's commitment to double its research and development budget in the coming years may also help, especially if social innovation research funding streams are created that can mitigate some of the practice- and institutional level research barriers identified above.

TEACHING

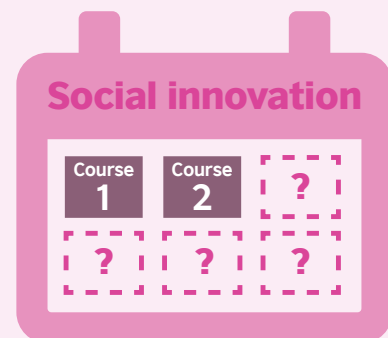### PRACTICE

Current

49 Courses

September +7 Courses

There are currently 49 live courses on social entrepreneurship or social innovation in Hong Kong, with a further seven due to start in September 2019[8]. However, the majority (66 per cent) of these are elective undergraduate modules, built into existing degree programmes. Just four HEIs account for 63 per cent of these courses[9].

INSTITUTIONAL

Collaboration

Only one of these programmes (Nurturing Social Minds) is collaborative, and the need for greater collaboration and embedded teaching (i.e., with real-life engagement with social innovation) was identified by numerous research participants. There is also a long-term need for cross-institutional programmes that span HEI boundaries (cross-accreditation).

SYSTEMIC

Social innovation

Course 1 Course 2 ?
? ? ?

There is a short- to medium-term need for additional training programmes for academics and practitioners in relation to teaching social innovation, to raise the skill-levels of teachers, and to increase the number of individuals who can teach social innovation. A lack of wide and deep networks within the ecosystem have been identified, which hinders embedded and place-based learning from occurring.

KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

PRACTICE

24

A total of 24 knowledge exchange projects were identified in the research, with 48 per cent of these being partnerships with NGOs, and with funding coming mainly from government, foundations or the respondent's own HEI (67 per cent). In addition, 79 per cent of all academic community engagement work takes the form of board/honorary roles or panel/committee membership, rather than active research-led engagement[10].
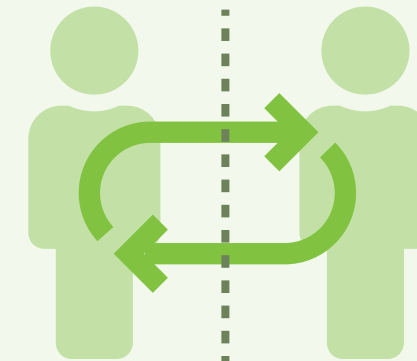
INSTITUTIONAL

There remains a paucity of collaboration between HEIs and the wider social innovation ecosystem, with competition often stifling coproduction, and both HEIs and NGOs being too protective over intellectual property (IP).

SYSTEMIC

There is also a need for global knowledge exchange through international institutional collaborations with other HEIs and NGOs. Whilst some HEIs do engage in such collaborations, and the work of the British Council on social innovation demonstrates the efforts of international organisations, there remains a lack of incoming knowledge. Perhaps more importantly, Hong Kong could also be exporting some of its own innovative social innovation IP to other ecosystems around the world.

INDIVIDUALS AND ECOSYSTEMS
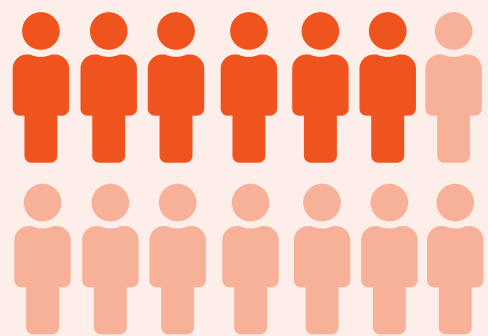
PRACTICE

Individuals play a key role in driving institutional change within Hong Kong's higher education sector. Indeed, just six academics account for the lead authorship of nearly half of the 50 publications identified in this research. There is, therefore, a need to recognise the importance of key individuals in driving social innovation, and to empower them to further expand (and more importantly to facilitate others to expand) their social innovation activities in Hong Kong's HEIs[11].

INSTITUTIONAL

There is a lack of institutional support within HEIs in relation to social innovation, and lead staff are not supported to deliver social innovation research and curricula. If universities support staff and students to establish social innovative organisations and to engage in volunteering/work placements as part of their degrees and as extra-curricular activity, it would help Hong Kong's HEIs better address the needs of the more socially aspirational younger generations (i.e., their customers).
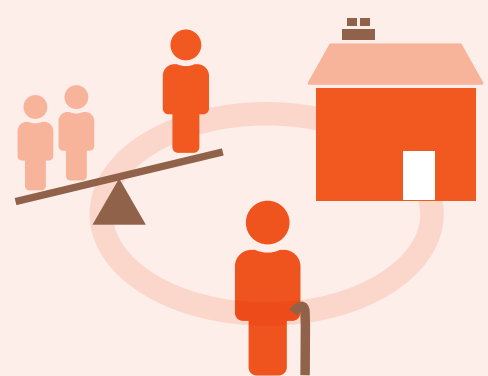
SYSTEMIC

Social inequality, an elderly/ageing population and housing are the three the key social problems facing Hong Kong identified through the survey responses include, accounting for 59 per cent of those identified. During the interviews, health was identified as a key determinant of all other issues, demonstrating the interrelated nature of social problems in Hong Kong and reinforcing the need for a collaborative, multi-agency approach to solve them. Finally, there is a lack of clarity on the concept and definition of social innovation, which makes it difficult for strategic leaders to understand and implement socially innovative research and curricula.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the data gathered through this research, the existing literature review, and the subsequent discussion, the following eight recommendations are put forward to contribute to the development of a higher education social innovation ecosystem in Hong Kong. These recommendations recognise the existing breadth of excellence that is already in place across research, teaching and community engagement in the Hong Kong higher education sector, and they seek to offer insights as to how this excellence can be built upon.

1. **Definitional clarity around social innovation (systemic):** the Hong Kong government (through the SIE Fund) and academic funding bodies (notably the Universities Grants Council (UGC)) should take centralised strategic action to raise awareness of social innovation amongst key stakeholders and the public. Also, a common practical definition of social innovation should be agreed amongst key stakeholders.

2. **Knowledge sharing (systemic):** Knowledge Transfer Offices should encourage HEIs to share IP with the wider ecosystem and tie the creation of IP to the RAE (as recognised impact). The UGC and international NGOs (i.e., British Council) should encourage cross-sector collaboration and partnerships in research and teaching, through the creation of applied impact funds and international knowledge exchange programmes.

3. **Research funding (systemic/ institutional):** HEI research funding streams should be established that encourage multi-disciplinary, pan-institutional, applied research. This could relate to the new focus on impact in the RAE, to assist universities to develop research that can have tangible pathways for impact. This funding should come from government and higher education sources, such as the UGC and internally from universities themselves. The UGC and the Policy Innovation Coordination Office should also include streams for social innovation/social entrepreneurship as recognised fields in grant application forms (General Research Fund, Early Career Scheme and Public Policy Research).

4. **Impact-led tenure track (institutional):** current academic tenure tracks[12] appear to limit the willingness to engage in applied/ impactful research. Universities should make changes to tenure criteria to acknowledge the value of applied, impactful research. This would also align with the new focus of the RAE. Academic staff performance indicators (where relevant) that are related to applied/impactful research (even for those academics with tenure) should also be introduced to encourage engagement with applied social innovation research.

5. **Embedded curriculum and training (institutional):** four main sub-recommendations:

   a. HEIs should collaborate with each other on degree programmes in relation to teaching (e.g., shared guest lectures) and possibly implement full joint degree programmes where possible. They should also look to make changes to university accreditation procedures that make the latter possible.

   b. Universities should ensure that social innovation courses include embedded teaching and learning (guest lecturers, student placements, competitions) so that learners can engage in applied learning.

   c. There is also space in the market for certificated training courses delivered between HEIs or in partnership with NGOs and social enterprises, both within and outside of Hong Kong. Pathfinder courses focused specifically on social innovation (i.e., whole degree programmes) should also be developed to build on the courses already in existence at PolyU and HKCT.

   d. Both the Hong Kong government and HEIs should ensure that sufficient training and support is in place to develop the capacity and skills of lecturers and practitioners in relation to embedded, practice-led teaching.

6. **Social innovation funding (institutional):** HEI funds should be created to support staff/ student social start-ups and spin-outs[13]. Where these new businesses emerge from research and teaching, universities should ensure that they are recognised and valued in tenure tracks and RAE. There should also be recognition that some organisational start-ups will not be social businesses, but could still deliver significant impact.

7. **Empower individuals (institutional/practice):** HEIs should recognise the key individuals that are leading on social innovation research and teaching within the Hong Kong higher education sector, and support them to further develop

research, teaching and knowledge exchange activities. They should also enable them to empower others to do the same, and promote their role as 'changemakers' within their institutions.

8. **Facilitate community engagement (practice):** HEIs should facilitate community engagement and co-production in social innovation research, in order to develop innovative solutions to existing social problems that communities actually need. This would allow university resources to be brought to bear in developing, testing and implementing new social innovations that deliver social impact in communities.

This research reported provides a starting point for mapping the ecosystem in Hong Kong, and provides the baseline data from which future progress in relation to social innovation research, teaching and community engagement can be mapped. Nevertheless, further work is required to continue to develop our understanding of the social innovation ecosystem in the Hong Kong higher education sector. Here are four possible future areas of research:

1. **Research impact:** the impact delivered by social-innovation-related research in Hong Kong still remains unclear, and the research data presented in this report suggests, anecdotally, that it may not be high, with a need for more impactful research moving forwards. The introduction of research impact into the RAE 2020 framework can help to demonstrate impact more clearly. Therefore, future research that seeks to ascertain the impact of research projects/publications both qualitatively through interviews with academics, but also quantitatively through the analysis of RAE submissions, can help to identify what real-world impact HEI research is having in relation to social innovation.

2. **Teaching:** whilst this report has mapped out the social innovation teaching that currently exists in Hong Kong, what the research does not show is what students think about the quality of the teaching in these courses, their relevance to the subject matter

and careers, as well as the impact they deliver. Future research should seek to explore student perceptions of social-innovation-related courses through a large-scale survey.

3. **Training:** where training does exist (current or future) for social innovation practitioners and those teaching social innovation, research should be undertaken that seeks to understand the efficacy of this training and the impact that it has on the quality of training/teaching delivered (related to the student survey above).

4. **Global benchmarking:** whilst this report has sought to make comparisons between Hong Kong and the rest of the world (notably the UK), a comprehensive mapping of social innovation research and teaching globally was outside the remit of this project. Future research should identify comparable higher education ecosystems in other countries and then comprehensively map the research and teaching that exists. This is important, as it will provide context in relation to Hong Kong's global position, and will highlight areas where Hong Kong is a global leader and where it may need additional capacity.

Photo by Colin & Linda McKie

5. A HIGHER EDUCATION SOCIAL INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM FOR HONG KONG

Figure 2 on pages 14 and 15 represents a weather ecosystem, to help show the linkages and flows of different types of capital between different elements of the ecosystem. The key focus of this analysis is the four capital clusters identified in prior research[14] as being critical to the emergence of social entrepreneurship around the globe: political capital, human capital, economic capital and social capital. Placing HEIs at the centre of the ecosystem map demonstrates their central importance as knowledge creators in driving the emergence, development and growth of social innovations. The role that research can have in developing theory, driving impact and creating knowledge (i.e., IP) demonstrates how community engagement and social value can be created (depicted by the 'rain' in Figure 2). Indeed, HEIs have access to significant quantities of:

- **Economic capital:** to fund social innovation research, the development of new innovative teaching modules/courses, and the creation of social innovation start-ups.

- **Human capital:** staff and students can be empowered to become social innovation leaders through a focus on tenure tracks and innovative approaches to educating students.

- **Social capital:** can be utilised to create social value within the community and to increase awareness of social innovation through their social networks (e.g., alumni).

- **Political capital:** with government (through evidence-based policy advocacy) and businesses (through training and corporate engagement).

- **Intellectual capital:** this is an HEI's key resource, created through original research and leveraged through global knowledge and partnerships, and which, along with the innovative ideas of staff and students, can be used to generate political, human, economic and social capital, in order to create new social innovation.

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1 A global list of the most prominent research centres in universities focused on SI is provided in Appendix J of the Main Report.

2 http://www.isircconference2019.com/

3 These conferences include the International Society for Third-Sector Research (https://www.istr.org/), the International Research Society for Public Management (https://www.irspm.net/) and the EMES International Research Network (https://emes.net/).

4 https://ashokau.org/

5 Of the 50 identified research outputs. These were identified through the survey, as well as through academic databases and university libraries.

6 This relates to research that specifically seeks to engage with and solve practical problems in society, rather than merely addressing theoretical questions (albeit theoretical perspectives may be embedded within the research).

7 It is important to note that social impact and social innovation are not the same thing, and that one can occur without the other. This should also be recognised when looking at how best to utilise research impact to grow social innovation. The RAE is a reporting framework for Hong Kong's higher education sector, in which universities submit their research outputs for assessment relating to quality and impact.

8 Eight courses/modules were historical and no longer running.

9 The University of Hong Kong, HKUST, Hong Kong PolyU and HKBU accounted for 40 of the 64 identified modules.

10 Advisory roles accounted for only 11 per cent of academic engagement.

11 It should be noted that the recommendation here is not to paint heroic narratives around these individuals, but rather to acknowledge good practice and enable others to learn from how they have approached individual, institutional and ecosystem barriers to social innovation research/teaching in the higher education sector.
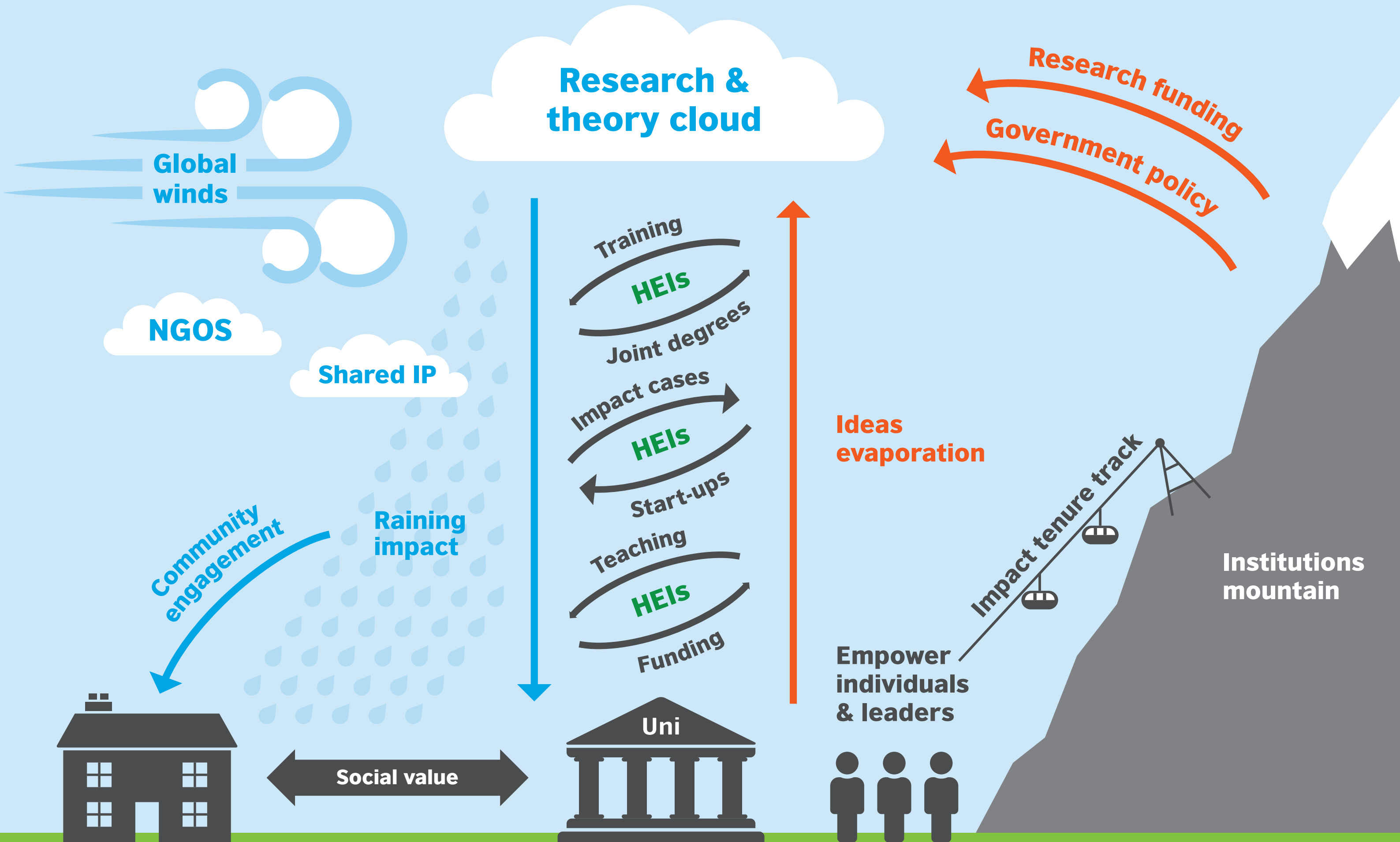
12 This refers to the career progression paths for academics, moving from a post-doctoral position to a full professorship.

13 A social start-up relates to a new social business created; spin-outs relate to university departments that leave the HEI to become an independent business, or research innovations that are commercialised.

14 Mair, J., Battilana, J. & Cardenas, J., (2012), Organising for Society: A Typology of Socially Entrepreneuring Models, Journal of Business Ethics, 111, 353-373.

15 It should be noted that, of course, such systems change can have negative as well as positive social or environmental outcomes, depending on the objectives behind the action of systems disruption.

FIGURE 2 – HIGHER EDUCATION SOCIAL INNOVATION

Research & theory cloud

Global winds

Research funding

Government policy

NGOS

Shared IP

Training

HEIs

Joint degrees

Impact cases

HEIs

Start-ups

Teaching

HEIs

Funding

Ideas evaporation

Community engagement

Raining impact

Empower individuals & leaders

Impact tenure track

Institutions mountain

Uni

Social value

ALEX NICHOLLS

Over the past two decades, there has been an increasing level of interest in how social and environmental change can best be achieved. This has, at least in part, been a result of a growing recognition that the existing institutions of the market, the public sector and the non-market were ill-suited to address a new set of global, so-called 'wicked', problems (Rittel and Webber, 1973) effectively. Such problems include climate degradation, endemic inequality (and all its attendant effects on health, education and social cohesion, as highlighted by Wilkinson and Pickett (2009)), the collapse of liberal democracy and the consequent rise of both extremist politics and an insulated elite separated from the conventions and norms of a social contract. These issues have manifested themselves at multiple levels of social action, from the macro-institutional structures of politics and power, to the mezzo-level of organisations and markets, and the micro-level of individual lived experience.

At the same time, digital technologies have transformed access to information, the nature of social interactions, and, even, the contours of market transactions. These innovations were largely led by 'hero' entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley, who subsequently became a group of 'youth' billionaires unprecedented in business history. The consequence of these two phenomena was the rise of 'social entrepreneurship' (Nicholls, 2006). This new construct suggested that the 'hero' entrepreneur model found in modern businesses could be translated to address social and environmental challenges with the same focus on innovation and scale typical of commercial start-ups. It was proposed that such a 'hybrid' approach (Pache and Santos, 2013)

could span across the traditional institutional boundaries of the market, public and non-market sectors to more effectively address 'wicked' problems. It was, perhaps, no coincidence that some of the leading advocates of such an approach were, themselves, the new 'hero' entrepreneurs of the digital economy, such as Jeff Skoll, Bill Gates and Pierre Omidyar, each of whom focused on growing and nurturing a new cadre of social entrepreneurs (Nicholls, 2010).

However, despite some powerful examples of the impact of social entrepreneurship models going to scale (notably micro-finance), it became increasingly evident that the micro-level focus on supporting the social entrepreneur, and mezzo-level focus on helping her scale her organisation/innovation, could not, alone, deliver significant social or environmental change. A consequence of this was a shift in focus, from the entrepreneur and her organisation/innovation, toward a new approach to understanding the systems that drove 'wicked' problems at the macro-level, as a diagnostic toward identifying key points of leverage where action could best alter such structures. This shift reified itself in a recasting of the discourse around social change, from social entrepreneurship to social innovation (Nicholls and Murdock, 2011; Van der Have and Rubalcaba 2016).

However, such a recasting required more than a simple semantic change. It also required a quite different approach to diagnosing the nature of effective social change action based upon a systems analysis that understood institutional factors as central to the creation and maintenance of negative social and environmental value. A key part of this was a recognition of the inherently

political nature of systems change, in the sense that both the maintenance and disruption of (failing) systems was, ultimately, an exercise in allocating and enacting power (Heiskala, 2007). Such a realisation was in stark contrast to the almost religious belief in the power of socially 'disembedded' hybrid markets that characterised the first phase of social entrepreneurship. This conscious de-politicisation of social change may also reflect the interests of the early pioneers, for whom existing institutional structures had been so profitable. The hand-wringing concerns of elite institutions – such as the World Economic Forum – over global inequality have a similar patina of irony.

Nevertheless, the systems change approach encapsulated in social innovation has proved to be a powerful model. Driving these enhanced impacts has been a set of approaches to systems analysis that reveals the structures of power and politics that frame key issues and how they interact with each other across organisations and institutions. Theory provides us with a range of approaches to systems analysis, notably in Complexity Theory. Elsewhere, drawing upon the economic sociology of Beckert (2009), one promising framework that has been developed in this context is the Social Grid Model (Nicholls and Ziegler, 2019). This macro-level, heuristic model suggests a dynamic set of relationships between three factors: institutions, social networks and cognitive frames. In this model, 'institutions' represent the organising rules and discourses that inhibit or empower action. 'Cognitive frames' articulate the mechanisms by which society makes sense of institutional material and gives or removes the legitimacy to orient action. Finally, 'social networks' are the coalitions of

individuals and groups that enact and/or challenge the norms of institutions and their cognitive framing.

Crucially, the action and effects of the Social Grid are dynamic – each element interacts with the others in constant patterns of stability or change. When the Social Grid is overlaid on a systems problem, it allows an analysis of the macro-level drivers of the issue to be revealed, as well as, simultaneously, suggesting how interventions in one or all elements of the Social Grid can destabilise the status quo to bring about systems change[15]. In terms of action for change, the role of social networks is central here. Coalescing groups around a social innovation agenda offers the prospect of disrupting extant cognitive frames to, in turn, alter or challenge the institutional norms that perpetuate a system. Important historical examples can be observed in the construction of social movements (such as the civil rights movement in the US or the suffragettes in the UK) or new representative bodies that rearticulate power (such as co-operatives or trade unions). More recently, digital technologies have facilitated the creation of 'virtual' social networks that can span many countries and operate in real time to mobilise for systems change (such as #MeToo or the Extinction Rebellion).

In this context, the role of education, as a neutral space that codifies and transmits knowledge, is significant. At its most effective, education builds discursive communities that can analyse systems and offer alternative readings of established ways of thinking and doing as social innovation. In this sense, they may fulfil the largely unfulfilled claims made for 'hero' social entrepreneurs described above, by socialising

systems change beyond the individual or organisation within the dynamics of the Social Grid. Moreover, higher education can be a particularly potent driver of systems change through research and teaching across social networks.

Given this, the BRICKS project's focus on the landscape of social innovation in Hong Kong's higher education sector is an important contribution to furthering our understanding of how to actualise and enact a particular social innovation system specifically addressing poverty. To this end, the stated objectives are:

To build capacity and community amongst leaders from academia around the role that social innovation theory and practice can play in poverty relief and related social issues

The four levels of analysis set out in the project – research, teaching, knowledge exchange and transfer, and community engagement – can be seen as the building blocks of a new social network for social innovation in the Becketian sense. The research articulates this as an 'ecosystem' that can create new social value. Research provides the legitimating foundations that underpin the translation processes of knowledge exchange across concentric circles of social networks, starting with students then moving outwards to the wider community. Moreover, the qualitative data analysis set out in the project reveals how power and institutions relate to personal agency. The discussion and conclusions further articulate how institutional material at the Social Grid level relate both to micro-level practice and macro-level systems norms, articulated as:

- *Systemic level:* cultural norms, traditions and incentive

structures that mediate inter-HEI collaboration.

- *Institutional level:* behaviours and attitudes of faculty and staff at HEIs to collaboration.

- *Practice-level:* frontline knowledge of how to collaborate in the delivery of social innovation initiatives.

The BRICKS research makes some important empirical contributions, too. Despite the proliferation of academic research and teaching on social innovation globally, the landscape of such work in Hong Kong is limited. This is, at least in part, due to institutional barriers around funding, intellectual capital, and human resources norms for this relatively new area of research. Moreover, examples of social network building – evidenced by research collaborations across the Hong Kong universities and engagement/knowledge transfer with practice – is relatively limited. The research notes that:

'There remains a paucity of collaboration between HEIs and the wider social innovation ecosystem, with competition often stifling co-production and both HEIs and NGOs being too protective over IP.'

This suggests a further institutional barrier around resource limitations.

Finally, the BRICKS research offers a range of practical recommendations based upon its empirical and theoretical insights. Drawing upon the theory of multiple capitals, the report concludes that academic communities can be built as social networks for social innovation in Hong Kong by an enhanced allocation of resources from government, as well as greater leadership from key actors across the

ecosystem. Social innovation as systems change demands both a diagnosis of existing ecosystem dynamics – as suggested, for example, by the Social Grid – and a prognosis of how best to realign current institutional material via the mobilisation of social networks to reconfigure cognitive frames legitimating social action. However, as this research notes in its conclusions, this will also require greater attention to impact management and measurement of social innovation – though this is a matter beyond the purview of the specific project (although, Nicholls (2009) provides some insights into this).

In conclusion, the BRICKS project explores how the universities in Hong Kong are currently acting as systems change actors from this point of view, and offers valuable recommendations for how to move forward. Today, there is an opportunity for universities to act as a key catalytic player in developing social innovation as a trusted social network builder. They occupy an historically unique position in society as neutral spaces for discussion, analysis and new thinking. The BRICKS project has set an agenda for Hong Kong in this regard. However, the implications of this research stretch further beyond this narrow geography.

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