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13 Apr 17, 13:30

By Anna McKie

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Top PI Tim Jackson: 'Chase a vision, not big names'

In the last 15 years sustainability guru Tim Jackson has chalked up several big ESRC wins, most recently for a £4.9m research centre. He tells Anna McKie how he tackles the "sublime and ridiculous" challenges of multidisciplinary team-building.

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Tim Jackson is the director of the Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity (CUSP) at the University of Surrey, which was set up with funding from the Economics and Social Research Council in 2016.

In addition to his career as a researcher, Jackson is also a playwright and has published several books, including *Prosperity Without Growth*, which came out in 2009 and has become something of a canonical text for people in the sustainability movement.

How did you get started in your career?

I'm a bit of an accidental academic. I started out running away from university to become a playwright, an ambition I had managed to keep running alongside my other work. When I finished my PhD in foundations of quantum mechanics at the University of Cambridge, I sold a play to the BBC thinking that was what I would do...Until I got the cheque from the BBC, which barely covered a days' worth of living.

So what did you do next?

I was living in London when in April 1986 reactor four at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, in the Soviet Union, melted in down. At that point I thought about what skills I had and went to Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace, who were the only ones taking alternative technology seriously at that point. I then got a post at London's South Bank University, which led to work as a senior researcher at the Stockholm Environment Institute, from there I was offered an academic job at the University of Surrey in 1995 and I've been there ever since.

How would you define your field of research?

It is in the nexus of issues around sustainability, quality of life and economics. Over the past 15 years I've built a number of social science groups, which have been funded by the ESRC. CUSP is the culmination of that work.

What was your position when you joined Surrey?

I joined on an Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council fellowship, working on thermodynamics and clean technology.

Why did you move from physical science to social science?

It became clear to me there are lots of technology solutions to environmental and sustainability issues, but we tend not to implement them. I became fascinated by why that is. I also wanted to investigate the combination of economic, psychological and social factors that were driving unsustainability and constraining some of the solutions that were clearly technologically feasible.

How difficult was it to make that move?

At that point I had done quite a lot of economics, so I wasn't uncomfortable in that area. Economics became the connection between the physical sciences and the social sciences in my case. I had published a book that looked at that relationship, which had come out of my work at the Stockholm Environment Institute, and that really helped.

Practically, how did you make the jump?

I won an ESRC fellowship in 2003 that was focused on a deeper understanding of the unsustainability of human beings, but also looked at how our understanding of psychology and behaviour could lead us to build a more sustainable society. That went against the leading paradigm of economics research at the time.

How so?

The prevailing economic theory was that the more you consume, the better off you are. The problem is that this leads to us trashing the planet. I was looking for evidence that there could be a way to consume less and be better off.

Was the ESRC receptive to funding work outside the usual paradigm?

Yes, and they have been very supportive of the agenda I began to build in the 2000s. I was the founding director of Resolve, the research group on Lifestyles, Values and Environment, which the council funded between 2006 and 2011. It was a multidisciplinary research group, involving sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, environmental scientists, and economists. It was a first major funding in this space.

What did Resolve achieve?

It struck a chord all over the world. The United Nations involved me in meetings when they were talking about sustainable lifestyles. It's such tricky territory but the group was scientific way of tackling the arena, so it held influence at an international level.

What were you doing when the ESRC opened their sustainable prosperity centre call, which led to the creation of CUSP?

I had just been awarded an ESRC fellowship on prosperity, sustainability and the green economy. This bought me a window in time, after a few hectic years, to be able to sit down, think and write. Just as I was about to get into that calm period, the opportunity arose to apply for the centre funding.

So you abandoned your 'quiet time'?

Yes, I recognised the opportunity to build critical mass in my research area. It demands a lot of investment, a lot of set up, time, intellectual energy, negotiating, recruiting, and so on. I might have lost my quiet time but the reward has been seeing this young, highly motivated and dedicated group of researchers come together within CUSP.

How has setting up groups and centres influenced your approach to research?

I've come to appreciate that as an individual you can only achieve so much. By building a research community you can make a bigger impact on research and on society more generally. It can be a tough lesson for academics, but it's been a really important one for me: building the wider research agenda is as much a part of what it means to be a good academic one's own research excellence.

How did you tackle the application for the centre?

First, I sat down with colleagues, mostly at the University of Surrey and brainstormed what we wanted to see in the research group, what disciplines, what themes, and then we thought who our partners could be.

How did you select partners?

We have a tendency in research and particularly in research centre funding to try to create a coalition of the great and the good, but in this case we wanted to do something different. Rather than focus on the big names, we looked for people who seemed to share the same vision as us. These were people working in a number of different areas: art and culture, philosophy, social enterprise research or in the investment community. The group we got together were not the usual suspects for big research council funding, but they were doing the kind of work we wanted to engage with.

After selecting partners, what came next?

We sat down before the outline proposal went in, as a group, and discussed how to proceed. After the outline proposal was shortlisted, we met two or three more times. That early work was really useful. It meant that by the time we were awarded the grant we knew each other, and knew how we worked together. We were able to get up and running quickly, we'd done recruitment of younger researchers and had a sense of guiding vision.

Did you encounter difficulties working across so many disciplines?

Interdisciplinary work always involves a learning curve. The Resolve group taught me a lot about the structural obstacles that can arise when people in different disciplines work together. The difficulties range from the sublime to the ridiculous.

What are the ridiculous ones?

There are minute bureaucratic ways in which universities split disciplines up that have to be overcome. Sometimes IT accounts can't be associated with two different departments and there can be similar problems with expenses.

And the sublime?

Different disciplines have their own concept of what knowledge is. In my field there are often arguments between econometricians, who like big data sets and robust regression, and sociologists, who like in-depth ethnographic understanding of what's going on. At first those differences may seem irreconcilable, but through leading groups like Resolve, I've learned that they are not.

How do you tackle them?

You have to get people to not only understand that the differences exist but that other sciences and disciplines have conceptions of knowledge that are as valid as their own. If you have people who are very territorial about their knowledge, it can get very factious very fast.

How did you apply that insight with CUSP?

Very early on we had discussions about the nature of different disciplines and how they related to each other. We said we were building the respect for each discipline's knowledge, as much as building the knowledge itself. That created an early path for successful conversations when we were putting the bid together.

What's the secret of your funding success?

It's true that when I look at statistical success rates, I feel very lucky. The thing for me has been to keep my eye on the prize in terms of the kind of research I want to do. That research vision is much more important than the voice that says during a bid "We should get this person on board because they are really well known", or "Let's change our direction because it's what the research councils seem to want right now". I also try to resist the temptation to put buzzwords in bids because everyone else is using them. In the end they turn out to be distractions, while a strong intrinsically driven goal will always speak to funders and peer reviewers.

How do you find time to write books alongside your research career?

It's not easy. I was in the process of writing a second edition of my book *Prosperity Without Growth* just as CUSP was being set up. Finding the space for writing, particularly as CUSP was being set up, investment needs of research leadership began to build, was a challenge. However, I think it's an important thing to do. It doesn't just provide the framework for research to go forward, but it keeps your own creativity and intellectual interest alive. It can be punishing but it's such a critical piece of the puzzle for me.

CV: Tim Jackson

2016 Hillary Award for Global Leadership

2010-2014 Director of the Sustainable Lifestyles Research Group, University of Surrey

2010 ESRC professorial fellowship to study prosperity and sustainability in the green economy, University of Surrey

2006-2011 Founding director, Resolve (Research group on Lifestyles, Values and Environment, funded by the ESRC).

2004-2011 Economics commissioner, UK Sustainable Development Commission

2003-2005 Research fellowship on the social psychology of sustainable consumption, ESRC's Sustainable Technologies Programme, University of Surrey

2000-present Professor of sustainable development, University of Surrey

1995-2000 EPSRC/Royal Academy of Engineering fellowship on the thermodynamics of clean technology, University of Surrey

1990-1995 Senior researcher, Stockholm Environment Institute

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