



## POLITICAL SCIENTISTS AND THE POLICY COMMUNITY

**Roger Scott**  
**Executive Director**  
**TJRyan Foundation**

### **RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT AWARD<sup>1</sup>** (UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND)

The Research Engagement Award recognises the efforts of a researcher from the Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences to translate research into benefits for the broader community beyond academia and/or disseminate significant non-traditional research outcomes and/or create significant connections or networks that have substantial impact.

As Executive Director of the TJRyan Foundation, I welcomed this advertisement in a staff notice received in my capacity as an emeritus professor within the School of Political Science and International Studies.

Universities are increasingly aware of the need to justify their existence in an era of financial stringency and competition for research funding. There is a popular perception that, unlike any other professionals, academics can decide for themselves the topics of their own research and rely on their academic peers to judge the quality and relevance of their output. Taxpayers and their political representatives are expected to fund the activities of this intimate circle without the need to identify any perceived benefit to the wider community.

To counter this horrendous libel, universities have now discovered a new dimension for staff evaluation – research impact - although some who serve on relevant appointment and promotion committees suggest informally that there might be a degree of lip-service to this on all sides.

The Australian Political Studies Association (AusPSA) will hold a conference at the University of Canberra at the end of September. I am giving a paper there that draws contrasts between this event and a similar conference I organized on the same campus forty years ago.

There is a striking contrast in the level of direct engagement which characterized Canberra in 1975 and Queensland in 2015, as well as in the nature of that engagement. This difference can be explained in terms of the changes in technology but also in the changes in attitudes about the value priorities and organizational context within which political scientists now operate.

As in so many voluntary organizations, the TJRyan Foundation has experienced a level of individual commitment on the part of its 100-strong membership which has varied from the significant to the symbolic. This is not intended as a criticism. Symbolism has a major benefit, attesting that senior and highly respected academic administrators were prepared to be associated with our enterprise. Our Board includes people who hold or have held major positions like Dean,

---

<sup>1</sup> University of Queensland Staff Notice, 9 July 2015.

Pro Vice Chancellor, or Deputy Vice Chancellor within the university system. Credibility is also attested by the senior scholars who are willing to be identified as Research Associates. Given the hostile organisational environment and political penetration of the bureaucracy under previous regimes, they were not making empty gestures.

There is still room for improvement in our performance. Many Research Associates find that their priority choices between teaching, research and other organisational and personal commitments lead to little activity beyond the initial commitment regarding engagement with the TJRyan Foundation. This is sometimes because their skills and areas of specialization have not been of wider public concern, so the Ryan home page tended to be dominated by lawyers and environmentalists in the Newman era but now includes much more material from economists. There is also a measure of discouragement in the advice apparently given to younger researchers by their senior academic supervisors – publishing ‘think pieces’ and associating with progressive causes has not always been regarded as a wise strategy for career advancement.

Explaining this lack of engagement requires an insight into the nature of academic work as currently practised in contrast to 1975. There has been extensive research both locally with the large-scale survey conducted by Brian Head’s team at the University of Queensland<sup>2</sup> and internationally with the work of people like the Talbots at Manchester.<sup>3</sup> This shows that there is a cultural gap between the senior public sector administrators who want access to the outcome of relevant research projects and the researchers who produce these outcomes (and are often pressured to demonstrate the impact of their research).

A report about the Talbots study is provocatively titled “‘Sir Humphrey’ and the professors: what does Whitehall want from academics?” This is a survey of senior civil servants’ views on the accessibility and utility of academic research and expertise. It concluded with much the same findings as those reported from Head’s Australian project:

Civil servants had a predilection for ‘pre-digested’ results of research and academic expertise. Their preference for ‘first contact’ was briefings or reports (79%) or media reports of academic outputs in newspapers and weeklies (61%) or professional journals (55%).<sup>4</sup>

The problem both in Britain and in Australia is that academics generally are not interested in producing outputs of this type. In a recent seminar presentation at the University of Queensland, Joshua Newman explained:

It has long been theorized that academics and policy-makers are citizens of separate ‘communities’ with little interaction between them. These communities are said to speak different languages, have different (and often conflicting) priorities, operate under unique systems of incentives and rewards, and follow different time-frames of activity.<sup>5</sup>

Newman then went on to postulate that:

---

<sup>2</sup> Head, B., Ferguson, M., Cherney, A. and Boreham, P. (2014) '[Are policy-makers interested in social research? Exploring the sources and uses of valued information among public servants in Australia](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.polsoc.2014.04.004)', Policy and Society, 33: 89-101. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.polsoc.2014.04.004>; Cherney, A., Head, B.W., Boreham, P., Povey, J. and Ferguson, M. (2013) '[The utilisation of social science research - the perspectives of academic researchers in Australia](http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1440783313505008)', Journal of Sociology, published online 25 November 2013. doi: 10.1177/1440783313505008.

<sup>3</sup> Colin and Carole Talbot, “A Survey of senior civil servants’ views on the accessibility and utility of academic research and expertise”, Policy@Manchester, accessed through Australian Policy Online, <http://apo.org.au/node/41593>.

<sup>4</sup> *supra cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Joshua Newman, staff seminar, Institute of Social Research, University of Queensland, 1 May 2015. Newman, J. (2014) '[Revisiting the “two communities” metaphor of research utilisation](http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/IJPSM-04-2014-0056)', International Journal of Public Sector Management, 27 (7): 614-627. doi:10.1108/IJPSM-04-2014-0056.

The relationship between policy makers and academia involves more than two communities, with significant interaction, and there is considerable potential to improve on the existing relationship.

He noted the emergence of a class of academics who might be considered research entrepreneurs, willing to provide the type of 'pre-digested' outputs sought by the public servants relevant to the particular policies being discussed. He suggested that these might be regarded as success stories when it came to reporting on the impact of research in the social sciences and their consequent acquisition of funding support from government sources. I would also suggest that such 'success story' entrepreneurs are few in number and not necessarily regarded as an ornament to the profession by their peers.

'Entrepreneurship' does not lack for encouragement from bodies external to the university, with the ARC emphasising the desirability of applications for funding and subsequent reports recognizing, measuring and reporting on research impact as a demonstrable and desirable outcome. Ferguson and Head cite several authorities who argue:

The social sciences, including Political Science, predominantly achieve external impacts by influencing people to think about things in a different, more precisely reasoned and better informed way, and this is where their value lies.

Yet the general experience from surveys is consistent with our own experience in running a think tank: a lack of enthusiasm or even a profound distaste for engagement on terms attractive to the users of research about government. 'Why is it so?' as Professor Julius Sumner Miller used to ask on his 1960s ABC science program for children.

One reason is the unwillingness of academics to adapt their activities to the priorities and timeframes of the public service and ministerial staff. The TJRyan Foundation website is a repository for the briefings, reports and media coverage constituting the 'pre-digestion' sought by policy makers at various levels in the government's policy-making hierarchy. But few academics share our priorities because of a reward system within universities which focuses on longer-term 'serious' research which needs time to mature. It is seen to be a more efficient and effective use of their time to seek publications in highly-starred journals or books with elite publishers who have their own slow process of quality assurance and frequently operate behind paywalls.

A second reason is the risks academics felt exposed to in moving from the insulated environment of a university to the realities of government policy agendas. Ferguson and Head asked AusPSA members to use their own words to identify two sets of challenges – those relevant to humanities and social sciences in general and those specific to Political Science:

The first two challenges described were those seen to be also faced by the Humanities and Social Sciences more generally:

1. The research impact agenda: the relentless external pressure to demonstrate 'relevance' and develop associated metrics; and the research agenda: attempts by governments to shape research agendas.
2. Improving engagement and communications strategies with both other academic disciplines and non-academics.

The first two of the challenges distinctive to Political Science are listed as:

1. Relevance : raising awareness of the importance, value and relevance of the disciplines in the face of a politically cynical and disengaged public. Gaining and maintaining legitimacy amongst other disciplines, with policy-makers, and the general public."
2. Autonomy and funding : maintaining access/funding while retaining the ability to directly critique political power; to analyse/engage with local political issues and problems in a context where funding is increasingly politicised.

The choice of language is enlightening: political scientists recognise that there is a general community of non-academics beyond the ivory tower; but they are nervous about venturing out to face 'relentless external pressures' from 'a cynical and disengaged public' in an 'increasingly politicised context', including 'attempts to shape their research agenda'.

The moral imperative for engagement is clearly stated in the AusPSA survey report:

Political Scientists should make major attempts to demonstrate 'relevance' and 'impact' (of their research and teaching) in the eyes of *non-academic funders and stakeholders*. (Italics in the original document)

What is not at all clearly stated is whether universities in general and political scientists in particular have the will to translate those words into actions.

- How many of AusPSA members have communications strategies for engagement with local political issues and problems?
- How many members have proceeded from the strategies elegantly articulated in funding documents to behaviour which leads to outcomes at the tactical level?

How many consider this a significant priority in "demands" on their time?

- Who is bothering to chase an award for research engagement when other forms of activity are more highly regarded by one's peers and by the university authorities concerned with other measures of prestige?

A major platform for engagement is *The Conversation*, financially supported by universities and other organisations, and, until recently, the Federal Government. *The Conversation* describes its aims in the following terms:

*The Conversation* is an independent source of news and views, sourced from the academic and research community and delivered direct to the public. ... Access to independent, high-quality, authenticated, explanatory journalism underpins a functioning democracy. Our aim is to allow for better understanding of current affairs and complex issues. And hopefully allow for a better quality of public discourse and conversations.<sup>6</sup>

The first three items in its Charter are to:

- Inform public debate with knowledge-based journalism that is responsible, ethical and supported by evidence;
- Unlock the knowledge of researchers and academics to provide the public with clarity and insight into society's biggest problems;
- Create an open site for people around the world to share best practices and collaborate on developing smart, sustainable solutions.<sup>7</sup>

The TJRyan Foundation has sought to emulate *The Conversation*, using our much more limited resources to focus specifically on Queensland issues. But it is not at all clear whether universities in general (most of which offer financial aid to *The Conversation*) have the will to support translating these words into actions, and whether political scientists will respond to that support.

Many of my own generation wish to remain engaged and committed as political scientists and the TJRyan Foundation think tank has provided that opportunity for me personally. However I worry that a focus on the reality of government, which reached a 'high water mark' with the 1975 political studies conference, may be dissolving in a profession grown comfortable by disconnecting from the wider community. Academic life remains the cherished occupation where there is such a range

---

<sup>6</sup> 'Who We Are', *The Conversation* website: <https://theconversation.com/au/who-we-are>.

<sup>7</sup> 'Our Charter', *The Conversation* website: <https://theconversation.com/au/charter>.

of choice about where to concentrate one's professional energies. I worry this will not long continue if the wrong choices are made, but would be encouraged if there is a strong field of political science applicants for the Research Engagement Award.