



THE AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL STUDIES ASSOCIATION (APSA)

The Value and Character of Political Science: Report on the Members Survey, September 2014

Michele Ferguson & Brian Head
University of Queensland

In the lead-up to the 2014 APSA conference, the APSA Executive agreed to a proposal by the president, Brian Head, to conduct a rapid survey of members' opinions on the nature and future of Political Science. 200 survey responses were received. The results were initially reported in the President's Address to the APSA Conference at the University of Sydney on 1 October, 2014. Major survey themes also centred on engagement with other disciplines as well as with non-academic audiences, and the perceived external 'impact' or 'benefit' of Political Science research and teaching beyond the walls of academia.

BACKGROUND

The focus on research impact reflects contemporary trends in higher education and research funding policies in a number of countries. There are sound moral, ethical and financial arguments that publicly-funded academics should use their training and activities for the good of society. Concepts of academic impact and quality have been continuously refined and measured, mainly in terms of high-status publications in journals with higher citation counts. Reliance on such 'ivory tower' measures of impact have been increasingly contested over recent years. Thus, in the United Kingdom and Australia, there have been increasing expectations that publicly-funded research should have 'impact' beyond academia, and should yield demonstrable economic, environmental and social benefits. These expectations, and an accompanying focus on encouraging research engagement and collaboration, have underpinned the external 'impact agenda'. In 2013 the Australian Research Council (ARC) defined research impact as 'the demonstrable contribution that research makes to the economy, society, culture, national security, public policy or services, health, the environment, or quality of life, beyond contributions to academia'.

The focus on measuring the economic and societal benefits from research has resulted in increasingly sophisticated and complex research assessment mechanisms, such as the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) exercise, and the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF). While the 2015 round of the ERA does not currently include an impact assessment component, the language of impact is explicit in ARC grant applications and reporting mechanisms, and impact trials were conducted in Australia in 2011-12 (Australian Technology Network of Universities and Group of Eight 2013).

Such exercises have showcased the benefits of research, but also highlighted the multiple challenges in producing and measuring evidence of something as nebulous as impact, and have been criticised as time consuming, expensive and inadequate (Martin 2011; Field 2013). Narrow, simplistic concepts of impact, based on narratives derived from the technological sciences – i.e., types of research that produce commercialisable or patentable products that yield immediate payoffs or solve concrete problems – fail to capture the foundational, incremental and replicating nature of much social science research (Macintyre 2010). These concerns have particular resonance in the social sciences, which produce outputs that are cumulative, diffuse and conceptual, rather than directly tangible. 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 (Bastow, Dunleavy and Tinkler 2014; Brewer 2013).

Given that the outcomes of these assessment exercises directly impact on the funding of grants, and competition for posts and promotion, the impact agenda has significant potential to influence how institutions and academics prioritise their work. While the ways in which the impact agenda is currently being implemented are contentious, the focus on impact presents opportunities for making an evidence-based case to governments for increased funding, especially in the areas of research translation and engagement (Donovan 2012; Cherney, Head, Boreham, Povey and Ferguson 2013). It is against this background that the survey canvassed the views of Political Scientists across two broad themes: the current state of the discipline and its future directions; and secondly, the significance of the impact agenda.


SURVEY RESULTS

The online survey was distributed by email to all current APSA members. Two hundred responses were received from a total of approximately 400 members, a response rate of around 50 percent. There was a reasonable balance between early-career and more established respondents.

Current role

	Freq.	Percent
Student	31	16.2
Early-career academic	60	31.3
Established academic	83	43.2
Other (e.g. retired; public sector; private sector)	18	9.4
Total responding to this question	192	100.0

POLITICAL SCIENCE – NOW AND IN THE FUTURE

- 
- What key themes are the most important focus for the next generation of Political Science scholarship?
 - Is Political Science a self-standing discipline or inherently inter-dependent with other knowledge disciplines?
 - In the context of contemporary trends in the university sector, are there any specific challenges that are crucial or distinctive for Political Science?

Q1. Political Science in the 20th century was arguably centred on broad themes such as the exercise of power and authority, civil and political rights, and the representation of interests. What key themes (up to 5) do you see as being the most important focus for the next generation of Political Science scholarship? Total responses = 729.

A wide variety of themes were listed by respondents, including those related to particular sub-disciplines (e.g. International Relations; Public Policy; and Political Economy). The main themes are listed below.



Key themes

- **Power and authority:** the exercise and abuse of power and authority; new forms of public and private power; the reduction of democratic authority; state power and authority; challenges to power and authority; the relationship between power and interests.
- **Governance:** diverse, plural and changing forms of governance; multi-level and multilateral governance; global governance; accountability; governance in international development; regional and transnational governance; collaborative governance.
- **Global:** issues and challenges; global politics; political, economic and social globalisation and tensions between regionalism/localisation, intergenerational justice; plurality; global civil rights.
- **Democracy:** the nature and future of, legitimacy, citizen engagement, problems, threats to and forces that undermine; limited nature of under capitalism; failure of; vs authoritarianism/democratic governance, representation and political challenges; (global) democratisation; democratic leadership; participative; institutions; broadening challenges to.
- **Inequality:** social, gender, economic and political; of wealth, income and power; within and between countries; individual, class, groups and regions.
- **Civil society:** and engagement; fracturing of civil society; new forms of political and citizen participation; representation of citizen, diverse and marginal interests.
- **Rights:** fundamental human rights, civil and political, economic; rights and recognition of interests and identities.
- **Climate change** and environmental issues.
- **Political communication and mediation:** new technologies; the internet and online activism; traditional, digital and social media.

Q2. In terms of intellectual content, do you see Political Science as a self-standing discipline or as inherently inter-dependent with other knowledge disciplines?

Self-standing 20.5% (41 responses)
Interdependent 79.5% (159 responses)

Respondents who selected 'interdependent' were asked to nominate up to four other disciplines they saw as closely connected with Political Science now and into the near future. Total responses: 549.

Other disciplines closely connected with Political Science



Q3. In the context of contemporary trends in the university sector, Political Science faces many of the same challenges as others within the ‘humanities and social sciences’ (HASS) grouping. Are there any specific challenges that are crucial or distinctive for Political Science?

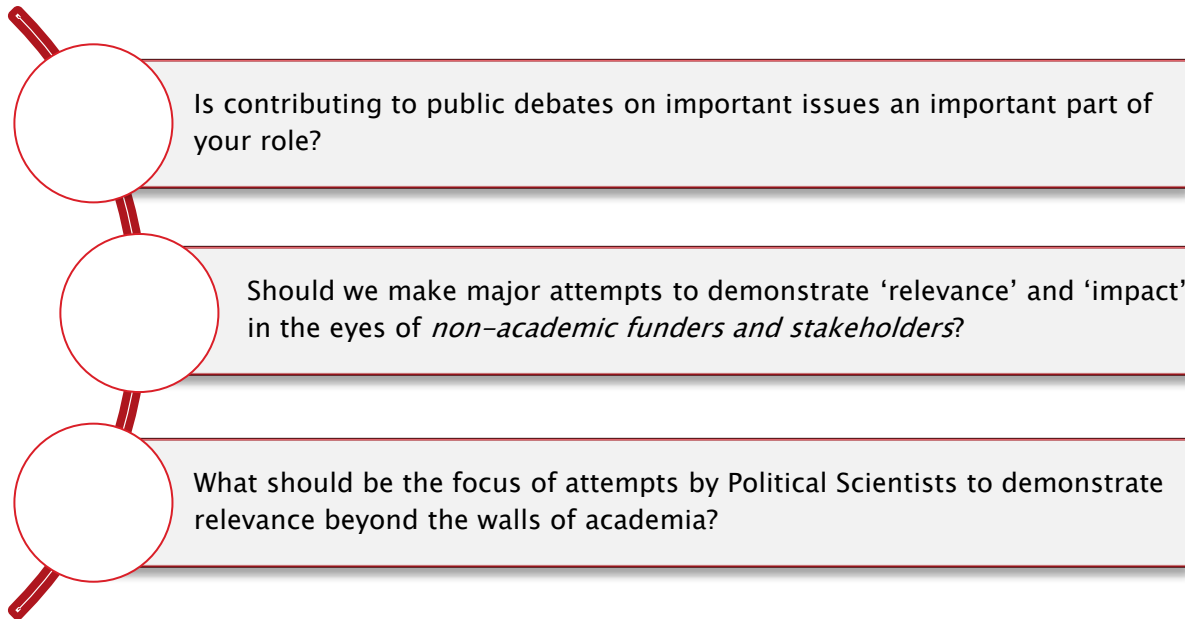
Some of the challenges listed are also faced by HASS more generally:

- 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.
- Improving engagement and communication strategies with both other academic disciplines and non-academics.

Distinctive challenges for Political Science

- **Relevance:** raising awareness of the importance, value and relevance of the discipline in the face of a politically cynical and disengaged public. Gaining and maintaining legitimacy amongst other disciplines, with policy makers, and the general public.
- **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 focus of the discipline:** balancing a focus on Australian issues with a global framing and International Relations; a more pluralistic discourse integrating mainstream western political theories with new voices and epistemologies from those in the non-western world/developing South and non-State actors, women and people of colour.
- **Institutional and internal culture:** lack of an academic career and changes to departments in the name of staffing flexibility; the internal culture and lack of cooperation amongst academics; predominantly ‘western’ in thinking; not fostering the next generation of Australian political scientists and the extensive recruitment of staff from overseas.
- **Relevance for students:** attracting students (in current funding/regulation environment) and improving their graduate attributes and skills, including training formal training in research designs and methods; concern about decline in numbers; job prospects given Political Science is not vocation driven.
- **Striking a balance:** between maintaining a disciplinary foundation and the integrity of the field, and the need to work in a trans-disciplinary way, at a time of rapid political, social and technological change.
- **Methodology:** the need for a more rigorous intellectual base which values and strikes a balance between quantitative, qualitative and theoretical approaches, and an increase in formal training in research design and methods.

POLITICAL SCIENCE – RESEARCH IMPACT AND ENGAGEMENT



Q4. Do you believe that making contributions to public debates on important issues is an important part of your role as a Political Scientist? Please state why or why not.

Yes 92.5% (184 responses)

No 7.5% (15 responses)

Q5. Do you believe that 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*? Why or why not.

Yes 75% (150 responses)

No 25% (50 responses)

Questions 4 and 5 explored perspectives related to the research impact agenda. The majority of respondents expressed views that supported engagement and demonstrating impact. As the responses to these questions had a large component of overlap, these have been combined below.

Effort and attempts at engagement and impact – Why?

- **Accountability and obligation:** Australian universities rely on public funding and support for their existence. If we are going to ask the wider community to provide us with resources to conduct research, we need to demonstrate why that research matters. We should be willing to explain what we do and why it is important. We owe it to our fellow citizens who fund our endeavours. We have an obligation to share knowledge and expertise that has been accumulated with tax-payer dollars.
- **An academic and personal sense of civic duty:** Academics' endeavours must serve the community; political scientists have a responsibility to contribute to creating a better society. Training in thinking about political and policy issues is an important resource to share with the wider community and society. We have a responsibility to use our skills and knowledge to engage with all of our own political contexts. A desire to give back.
- **Informing and influencing debate:** Academics bring a different perspective and knowledge set from media professionals and politicians, and can lead, encourage, inform and influence (and improve the quality of) debates, providing an alternative, independent and expert voice.
- **Public education:** Knowledge is a public good. It helps to develop the body of knowledge and informs the critical reframing of important social issues. Responsibility to educate the public about the political process and communicate the importance of politics. Without an informed and engaged population, change is difficult.
- **Real world value and application:** Contributing practically to real problems. Political science is all about the real world – what's the point of studying it if it won't be applied in practice. 'The point is not just to understand the world but to change it.' Theory to practice is critical, with one informing the other. Influencing and informing public policy.
- **Opportunities to raise the public profile and recognition of the value of the discipline:** Our knowledge and skills are not understood or valued sufficiently, and the value/relevance of the discipline does not seem to be immediately obvious to either our colleagues in other disciplines, the media or the general public. Contributing to public debates helps maintain our relevance to the wider community; it demonstrates the relevance of political science to everyday life. A public profile for academics reminds the public of their importance in a time of shrinking funding.
- **Pragmatism:** The realities of today's world means that we need to learn to play the game. If we cannot demonstrate relevance to non-practitioners we lose in what has become a competitive marketplace for knowledge. 'It is necessary to gain funding, shore up support from the university executive, and attract talented students.' We should make attempts to demonstrate impact because it provides [non-academic funders and stakeholders] with greater understanding and confidence in the research being undertaken.

A number of respondents who answered 'yes' to questions 4 and 5 added some provisos: e.g., yes to public debates as long as the contributions are research-led rather than general commentary; yes to 'relevance' and no to 'impact'; sometimes okay; and 'within limits' and while questioning what 'relevance' and 'impact' means. While understanding the need to meet the requirements of funding bodies and agencies assessing academic outputs, there is significant concern that the emphasis may be shifting too far from primary research, quality research and writing that adds to human knowledge and understanding, towards a more mechanistic formula with an emphasis on overtly applied research.

One respondent indicated that they would like to participate in public debates but had no training or experience to do so and had never been asked.

Effort and attempts at engagement and impact – Why resist or limit this trend?

- **Roles:** Public engagement and contributing to public debate is a role, but not the most important one; we are scholars and teachers.
- **Professional boundaries:** Against the notion of political scientists as public intellectuals or pundits. It is not our role to solve policy problems or the specific concerns of the private sector.
- **Conflicts of interest:** The parameters of impact are set by governments; serving the interests of stakeholders and their values. 'While in the best of worlds policy relevance should not skew the selection of research themes or presentation of results, also in the best of worlds, evidence rather than prejudice should inform policy choices.'
- **Flawed definitions and measures of impact and relevance:** Difficulties in demonstrating impact in the short-term and not all works fits in easily.
- **Making impact:** The focus should be on making impact rather than measuring it. 'Being relevant is more important that showing it.'
- **Distorting the focus of the discipline:** Being forced to demonstrate impact limits the potential of research. It is vital to pursue subjects which are perceived to be most important. 'Blue sky' thinking will always be important, and may also be relevant.

Q6. What forms of 'impact', or what types of 'benefit', do you think should be the focus of attempts by Political Scientists to demonstrate relevance beyond the walls of academia?

Forms of impact/types of benefit

- **Communication:** Make knowledge and research findings accessible and available. Make the most of opportunities to write for non-academic audiences/broad readership: books, blogs, opinion pieces, editorials.
- **The media:** Direct engagement with the media; media commentary; expert commentary; social media.
- **Contributing to, informing, shaping and influencing:** Public debate, public opinion, policy-making and decision-making.
- **Contribution to society:** Better public understanding and more aware citizenry; improving social awareness and social cohesion.
- **Contribution to civic education:** Through forums, public lectures/workshops, websites, contributing to school curriculum development.
- **Engagement:** With community; partnerships with NGOs and international agencies; think tanks, discussion forums, committees, advisory groups.
- **Develop strengths in research and methods:** That have real world application; useful explanations of real world problems that have practical significance for practitioners. Theoretical contributions are also important – a balance.
- **Providing an evidence base:** for public policy; engagement with policy makers and parliamentarians

CONCLUSION

The 200 APSA members who responded to the survey indicated that the study of power and authority, democracy, and governance remain an important focus for the next generation of Political Science scholars. The majority view the discipline as interdependent rather than self-sufficient, and closely connected with a number of other disciplines, including sociology, history, law, economics, philosophy and psychology. APSA members identified challenges that are being faced by the social sciences more generally, in the form of the impact and research agendas, but also challenges that are distinctive to Political Science. These included raising awareness of the importance, value and relevance of the discipline, and attracting students, in the face of a politically cynical and disengaged public; and maintaining academic autonomy in an increasingly politicised funding context.

A substantial majority of APSA respondents indicated that they support efforts at engagement and attempts to demonstrate the 'impact' and 'relevance' of their academic endeavours. They identified a number of ways in which Political Scientists can demonstrate the relevance of their own work and that of the discipline to the wider community, and identified some ways to make their knowledge both available and accessible. This majority viewpoint appears to be driven by a genuine sense of responsibility and civic duty as publicly-funded academics to use their expert knowledge and skills to contribute to creating a better society, while also acknowledging the realities of compliance with the funding and reporting requirements of the current impact agenda. An important minority voice expressed disquiet concerning the potentially narrowing expectations that a future 'impact agenda' might impose, especially if the measurement schemes under-valued the importance of basic research, conceptual research, and critical thinking in general. Co-option into the priorities set by industry or government was not greeted with enthusiasm. It is clear that these debates have a long way to run, and that Political Science will need to be in the forefront of analysing the merits and the limits of particular notions of benefit and impact.

REFERENCES

- Australian Research Council. (2013) 'Research impact principles and framework'. Available: <http://www.arc.gov.au/general/impact.htm>
- Australian Research Council. (2014) 'ERA 2015 submission guidelines', Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra. Available: <http://www.arc.gov.au/era/default.htm>
- Australian Technology Network of Universities and Group of Eight. (2013) 'Excellence in innovation: Research impacting our nation's future – assessing the benefits'. Available: <https://go8.edu.au/programs-and-fellowships/excellence-innovation-australia-eia-trial>
- Bastow, S., Dunleavy, P. and Tinkler, J. (2014) *The impact of the social sciences: How academics and their research make a difference*, London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Brewer, J.D. (2013) *The public value of the social sciences*, London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Cherney, A., Head, B.W., Boreham, P., Povey, J. and Ferguson, M. (2013) 'Research utilization in the social sciences: A comparison of five academic disciplines in Australia', *Science Communication*, 36 (6): 780–809.
- Donovan, C. (2011) 'State of the art in assessing research impact: Introduction to a special issue', *Research Evaluation*, 20 (3): 175–179.
- Field, L. (2013) 'Impact sometimes requires long decades of research', *The Australian*, 29 May [Online], Available: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/impact-sometimes-requires-long-decades-of-research/story-e6frgcjx-1226652450543?nk=45aa5b27b2900680bbee63551de476f8#>
- Macintyre, S. (2010) *The poor relation: A history of social sciences in Australia*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press.
- Martin, B. (2011) 'The Research Excellence Framework and the "impact agenda": Are we creating a Frankenstein monster?', *Research Evaluation*, 20 (3): 247–254.
- Research Excellence Framework. (2011) 'Assessment framework and guidance on submissions, REF 02.2011'. Available: <http://www.ref.ac.uk/pubs/2011-02/>