

Institution: University of Essex

Unit of Assessment: 21 - Politics and International Studies

a. Context

The Department of Government at Essex is committed to applying its academic expertise in rigorous political analysis to address key social and economic issues. The use of appropriate quantitative, qualitative, comparative, and experimental research to inform evidence-based policy is central to the Department's ethos. The Department has repeatedly demonstrated that its analyses can contribute to key domestic and international policy debates, and directly influence policy development. The impacts achieved by the Department reflect its strengths in the study of democracy, conflict and security, elections and voting behaviour, and accountability of public institutions. The beneficiaries of the Department's work include international organisations (EUROSTAT, UN Development Programme, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, World Bank), international NGOs (IDEA, Medecins Sans Frontieres) and clientele in Europe, Asia, Africa, and North and Latin America.

The Department has four research groups, each producing distinct impacts:

- The Electoral Research/Public Opinion group's research has had a wide impact, including providing evaluations for Eurobarometer study designs for TNS-Gallup, creating a 'spin-out' commercial partnership to conduct UK-wide opinion polls, informing legislation that successfully tackled 'family voting' practices in UK and Macedonia, and working with parliamentarians and NGOs in Georgia, Mozambique, and Ukraine on the production of evidence-based policy documents. This group also has continuing impact deriving from Anthony King's position as a public intellectual – including the continuing effects (recent reports on party funding and MP's expenses and allowances) of his role as a founder member of the 'Nolan Commission' on Standards on Public Life and his work for the BBC in 2008 on broadcasting to the devolved regions of the UK.
- The Comparative Political Economy (CPE) group has produced research on human rights violations and assessments of democratic performance that has informed the operation of significant international organisations, including UNDP, UNHCR, and IDEA.
- The International Conflict group has influenced the way that international organisations such as IDEA and the World Bank measure and analyse civilian casualties in violent conflict situations. Members of this group participate in Folke Bernadotte Academy's working groups on Security Sector Reform, Peacekeeping Operations, and Gender and Peacekeeping. Work on predicting risk, including calculating the likelihood of terrorist attacks, has attracted interest from Swiss Re and the US Department of Defense.
- The Political Theory/Discourse Analysis group produced foundational work critiquing public policies relating to airport expansions, identity technologies and responses to historical injustices. Research on complicity, produced jointly with Medecins Sans Frontieres, guides the work of that organisation and others working in complex humanitarian emergencies in the field.

b. Approach to impact

The Department of Government has a clear strategy for ensuring that its research is shared with, and where appropriate informed by, the needs of users and potential users. The Department pursues three broad approaches to achieving impact for its research.

- *Interactive*: this involves forming relationships with key individuals in significant user organisations and developing a continuing dialogue. This means that the Department's research activities are in part guided by the needs of the organisation. For example, research on political forecasting has been key to the way that YouGov was established. It has also produced an ongoing fruitful relationship, with recent Essex research informing YouGov's trust in online polling and YouGov providing seed-corn funding for the National Policy Monitor (NPM). The NPM works with YouGov to conduct monthly polling on public experiences of and attitudes to the delivery of policy in national and local government, as well as in selected areas of the private sector. The NPM's monthly internet polls of around 1,000 people provide a valuable barometer of how the public is reacting to government policy and performance.

- *Dissemination*: this involves actively disseminating summaries of research findings to key journalists, politicians and political activists with the aim of informing public debate and contributing to policy formation. For example, Essex research on the relationship between negative views of politicians and propensity to break the law was reported on the front page of the *Independent* 20 August, 2011. The following day it reported that David Cameron and Ed Miliband had ‘clashed’ over these research findings. Dissemination also involves staff members organising and presenting at conferences and workshops where influential journalists, politicians and members of relevant organisations will be present. For instance Essex contributions to a workshop held in June 2013 at the British Academy on ‘Gender and Local Ownership’ were designed to attract representatives from various NGOs, including Peace Direct; Women, Peace and Security; Kvinna till Kvinna; and Action on Armed Violence.
- *Engaging with Westminster*: the Department is part of the fabric of political life in the UK and its work attracts interest from parties, parliamentarians, think tanks, pollsters, and journalists. For instance, a knowledge exchange event on attitudes to foreign policy, in collaboration with the Foreign Policy Centre, was held at the House of Commons. Participants included John Spellar MP (Shadow Minister for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs), Carola Hoyos from the *Financial Times*, and Joe Twyman of YouGov. The Department is committed to informing policymakers about its research and, for example, the Citizens in Transition project findings were launched at the House of Lords in January 2012. The event was attended by MPs, members of the House of Lords, and various organisations, including the Citizenship Foundation, Democratic Life, and the Association for Citizenship Teaching. A member of the Department worked as a Specialist Advisor to the Speaker’s Conference on Parliamentary Representation and writes regularly for *The House* magazine.

The Department provides practical and financial support, as well as career incentives, to encourage staff to achieve maximum impact from their research. All researchers have access to a Communications Officer who provides assistance writing press briefings and putative press articles (averaging almost 300 media mentions a year). The Department has an excellent relationship with the BBC’s Political Research Department and regularly responds to requests for interviews and information. Impact counts very significantly in appointments and promotions to Senior Lecturer, Reader and Professor – examples of this include the extensive impact activities that contributed to the promotions of Tom Scotto and Natasha Ezrow to Professor and Senior Lecturer, respectively.

The Department takes full advantage of the support for impact provided by the University. Researchers benefit from the provision of various services from the University’s Research and Enterprise Office (REO), including: a Faculty Impact Officer, who identifies new impact opportunities and documents successful impact activities; a Funding Development Manager, who assists in incorporating impact into applications for external research funding; and a Research & Business Partnerships Manager, who establishes relationships with external partners and provides support to sustain those relationships. The Department has taken advantage of these links and the University’s Knowledge Transfer Innovation Fund and has received grants to hold a user-engagement workshop, disseminate briefing papers to governments, think tanks and NGOs, and run two Knowledge Exchange events at Westminster. The University hosts Society Central, a social-policy website which aims to forge better connections between social-science researchers and those involved in the policymaking process. The site specialises in finding research evidence to fuel informed debate on current issues, and researchers in the Department are encouraged to submit pieces for publication.

c. Strategy and plans

Since its establishment the Department of Government has produced scientific research that makes a difference to the world that it inhabits. The Department’s early adoption of comparative and quantitative research methods was in part based on the assumption that good description was prior to good causal explanation and, accordingly, good policy prescription. Since even comparative methods raise questions about causality, various members of the Department have also used natural- and survey-experiments to supplement their comparative work. This, together with the commitment to scientific methods, led some in Department to use experimental research designs to study campaign and media effects and survey design. These developments have led naturally to a new interest in experimental methods that provide the most compelling causal

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accounts and policy prescriptions. This emphasis on causality includes a new ESRC-funded project on robustness that seeks to improve the reliability of causal inference. In 2013 the £0.5m ESSEXLab was launched, which provides a state-of-the-art facility for impact-rich research. One experiment will propose a new explanation of the ‘winner’s curse’ – the tendency for people to overpay in auctions – that is rooted in human personality. This research findings generated here may help to improve the design of auctions and competitive bidding processes, including auctions of radio wave spectrum or bids for railway franchises. A major new project on honesty will also utilise the lab. This will inform policymakers, educators, think tanks, and parents about its findings on integrity and character-building. A further methodological development is the use of disaggregated data to provide accurate simulations for the purposes of prediction. This method has already produced findings on predicting risk that have been attracted interest from Swiss Re and the US Defense Department. Further research using disaggregated data, including its use to predict the location of conflict and forecast its likelihood, may be of use to national governments and major international organisations.

The Department is committed to strengthening its position as a provider of research that underpins evidence-based policy. In 2013 the Department launched its Institute for Social Science Data Analysis, which conducts state-of-the-art applied quantitative research in three areas: survey analysis, evaluation analysis, and social analytics. The Institute will collaborate with private providers of survey, evaluation and data analysis services, and will actively engage with policymakers and the public. The Department will also strengthen its links with the private sector by establishing at least two Knowledge Transfer Partnerships by 2018. Discussions have so far taken place with TNS, ICM, YouGov and RAND Corporation. There is constant need to ensure visibility within policy debates and, to this end, the Department will further the development of Society Central. This will include broadening the reach of the site to include international development, human rights, conflict and international relations. The aim is for policymakers to engage with research on pressing issues and also to open up a dialogue that enables our researchers to better understand the needs of policymakers.

d. Relationship to case studies

The British Election Study (BES) case study exemplifies the idea of a long-term interaction between the Essex research team and a key external user – in this case, the internet polling company YouGov. The BES has commissioned surveys from YouGov since 2001 and the BES team engaged in extensive comparisons of internet and face survey data on a continuous basis thereafter. In 2007, the team published an article that clearly validated YouGov’s polling methods – providing considerable credibility to YouGov’s claims to accurately measure UK public opinion. In 2008, YouGov supported the BES team in the creation of a spin-out commercial partnership that has since raised over £60,000 to support BES research.

The case study on Electoral Fraud demonstrates successful dissemination and engagement with Westminster. Birch initially co-authored a scholarly article on the fairness of electronic voting in 2004. The paper was widely disseminated and led to Birch being invited to submit evidence to a Commons Select Committee in 2004. These findings were incorporated in the Electoral Administration Act 2006, which had its first major general election impact in 2010. Birch’s work had also come to the attention of the UNDP and many of her ideas were included in the electoral reforms that it sponsored in Macedonia in 2010.

The Human Rights and Democracy Assessment case study illustrates the way in which the University provides support for impact activities. The University bought-out 80% of Landman’s time to enable him to focus on research and building relations with major international organisations. Landman’s excellent record of impact contributed to his promotion to Executive Dean in 2013.

The case study on the BBC’s coverage of the UK’s nations and regions stemmed from research that King had conducted on devolution, which involved significant engagement with Westminster (and Holyrood, Cardiff Bay, and Stormont). This scholarly work, along with King’s reputation as a public intellectual, led to his expertise being sought by the BBC, who commissioned him to produce a report on the Corporation’s delivery of news and current affairs in the devolved UK nations and to recommend ways of improving it. His advice was accepted in full and the BBC now employs the ‘King rules’ in determining its coverage of the UK’s devolved political institutions.