



State of the Social Sciences: Consultation

Response from the National Committee for History and Philosophy of Science at the Australian Academy of Science

24 March 2021

The National Committee for the History and Philosophy of Science at the Australian Academy of Science includes active scholars and represents various teaching programs and research centres in Australia, promoting a spirit of cooperation essential for maintaining communication within the HPS/STS community. It is an important point of contact for those engaged in recording, analysing, and publicising excellence in past and present Australian science, and making these results accessible. The NCHPS actively contributes to governmental and policy debates in Australia as well as to maintaining ongoing reviews of the state of the field, and efforts toward its continued growth. The committee membership's teaching and research interests are inter and trans-disciplinary, crossing the natural and physical sciences, social sciences and humanities.

While the definition proposed for 'social sciences' is acceptable, it neglects the possibilities of the social sciences "intervening" in social systems and is silent about normative and/or value-laden aspects of the social sciences.

The COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing climate change responses have shown the need for the expertise and methods of social science and the humanities to enrich and enlarge our understanding of these events and processes. As well as shaping our responses to such crises, helping us to adapt to them or mitigate them, the social sciences also can help us reframe them and expand the analysis of them in constructively critical ways. HPS and STS are thus more valuable than ever before in connecting the humanities and social sciences with other sciences.

There is also a need to highlight opportunities available to the social sciences to work directly with medicine, engineering, and other STEMM disciplines, as equal collaborators, if capacity can be built. The funding system actively discourages this – particularly the necessity in ARC applications to absolutely avoid medical research. In comparison, the MRFF and NHMRC are actively inviting humanities and social sciences involvement.

Academics in the broad fields covered by the NCHPS have been impacted by the recent impacts of the pandemic. We would highlight job security and reduced career opportunities in the field as entire departments have been closed and opportunities for competitive funding eroded. Other impacts include:

- Loss of ECRs on casual and fixed-term contracts.
- Increased teaching loads due to budget cuts.
- Immediate impacts on research output (particularly for women) due to caring and other responsibilities during 2020 in particular.

Despite this, there is still need in our disciplines for training to negotiate the academic funding systems, most crucially as we are an interdisciplinary area, in negotiating disciplinary silos enforced by ARC FoR codes. This issue is further reinforced in the assessment of grant application by those working in the “core” parts of History, Philosophy and Sociology are often not best suited to assessing work at the intersection of their discipline and others (e.g. History of Medicine or Philosophy of science). They are typically unfamiliar with the topics and the appropriate metrics for assessment of quality.

In the education context, graduates in our field are in high demand. A few of the key skills they bring to the workforce are:

- Synthesis and analysis of complex information
- Understanding of the interplay between people, culture, and government.
- Strong written and oral communication skills.

Thus far, the government’s job-ready package has had little impact on our disciplines. Indeed, enrolment seems to be up in several of our disciplines and students seem to value inter-and trans-disciplinary approaches in the courses we offer.

It may be that the inter and trans-disciplinary that our field offers represents a microcosm of an advantage that the social sciences in general enjoy. Strategies that celebrate the field’s ability to solve complex problems can only be valued as we move into our troubled future.

If you would like to reach the committee for further discussion, please email nc@science.org.au.