Building inherently impactful research programs: the role of organizational context

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1. Introduction

This article considers the significance of organizational context for research impact. For the purposes of this article, we define research impact as academic research that influences policymaking either (1) directly, by providing evidence that informs specific policy decisions and directions and/or (2) indirectly, by changing the way policy issues are understood and, through that, policy decisions made.

Much scholarly examination of research impact focuses on the role of individual academics as the key agents of impact, either explicitly or implicitly. Academics are encouraged to consider how their research may inform policy development at various stages of the policy cycle (Cairney and Oliver 2020) and to be entrepreneurial in how they engage with policymakers to influence their decisions at critical points in that
cycle (Cairney 2018; Arts and Humanities Research Council 2020). More critical scholarship usually focuses on the complex nature of policymaking before considering what it means for scholars trying to engage with this more complex reality.

The focus on impact as the work of an individual academic marginalizes consideration of the broader organizational contexts within which academics conduct research. By organizational context, we are referring to the structures, operations, workplace cultures and management arrangements of university departments. The issue of an organization’s approach to impact and its influence on research outcomes broadly conceived – research productivity, reach and uptake – has received little attention in the literature, despite figuring centrally in formal impact assessments, such as that conducted by the Australian Research Council (ARC). Nguyen and Meek (2015) observe that “[a]lthough a university needs a strong research management structure, surprisingly, very few publications have discussed the key elements in organizing and structuring university research from an organizational perspective” (p.43). Within this already limited literature, we are not aware of any attention being directed to the specific issue of how organizational context may influence research impact potential, save a recognition that organizational context can influence a target organization’s receptiveness to, and thus uptake of, research (Boxshall 2018).

This gap in the literature is surprising given organizational context is acknowledged in organizational and business studies as an important factor determining whether and how corporations and other institutional entities meet their organizational objectives (Mintzberg 1979; Burgelman 1983; Ghoshal and Bartlett 2007). Intuitively, organizational context necessarily influences impact prospects as context shapes both the incentives to undertake impact-oriented research and the operational support provided to researchers to undertake impactful research. Given the increasing importance ascribed to impact by universities and their funding bodies, as well as the fact that organizational context is a variable within the strategic competence of universities to manage in their efforts to improve research impact, the role of organizational context on research impact is an area ripe for further research.

To this end, this article considers how organizational context relates to research impact. It presents case study reflections from a university department – the Department of Pacific Affairs (DPA) – at the Australian National University (ANU) and its approach to research impact. The article draws on the personal experience of members of the DPA management team who have managed the growth of a small research program into a fully fledged university department. As is discussed further in this article, DPA’s establishment as a university department in 2017, following two decades’ growth since the program’s inception in 1996, was in large part enabled by a long-term funding partnership with the Australian Government’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and for a time the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID). The article posits that this funding partnership has been central to shaping the department’s organizational context.

The article begins with a brief literature review on organizational context and its role as an impact factor before providing a description of the policy environment in the Pacific and the ways in which DPA has undertaken policy-relevant research that engages with this environment. The article then considers DPA’s experiences in
supporting impactful research from an organizational context perspective. The aim here is not to provide a definitive explanation of how organizational factors can shape impact efforts, but to highlight how organizational context is a factor influencing impact potential. This is done by focusing on five dimensions – research-policy positioning, staffing, organizational culture, governance and resource management. The article concludes by considering implications for the organization of university research departments more broadly.

2. Research impact – where’s the organizational context?

The research impact literature has begun to benefit from a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between academic research and policymaking. However, the literature continues to focus on the role of individual researchers in achieving research impact. For example, Dunlop’s analysis of UK-based political science and international studies impact case studies found that in 66 per cent of cases impact accounts were based upon research conducted by a single “lead” academic. The framing of the impact challenge as an inherently individual one arguably reflects a historical understanding of the research process. Based on her analysis, Dunlop observed (Dunlop 2018): “We can reasonably argue such “heroic” accounts are reflections of reality; they map on to the structure of knowledge production in the social sciences where ideas are often developed by individuals and where individual’s backgrounds play a key role in how they engage with impact.” (p. 273)

There is a small literature focusing on how research context and the presence of institutional and structural factors affects an institution’s research capacity. For example, Nguyen and Meek (2015) applied Mintzberg’s (1979) theory on the structuring of organizations to the study of university research programs to assess how the organizational context and structuring of research departments within universities can influence research productivity. They identified ten “management and organizational tasks” that contribute to an institution’s research capacity. There is also literature pointing to a range of factors within the university environment that can undermine impact prospects, including weak professional incentives to engage with policymakers (Boswell and Smith 2017). It also points to structural reasons why policymakers may be resistant to considering research, including its inaccessibility and time pressures they face in making policy decisions (Boxshall 2018). This literature highlights significant factors beyond the agency of individual researchers that influence the success of efforts to breach research-policy divides and suggests there is a need for impact strategies to better account for these structural factors.

There is also an emerging recognition that research is often undertaken as a collective activity2 (Metz, Boaz and Robert 2019). Some impact literature recognizes research as a system of co-production, whereby research partnerships between individual academics and policymakers can enhance the potential for research uptake and impact. For example, Metz, Boaz and Robert (2019) note the “growing interest in the potential of collaborative approaches to knowledge production as innovative solutions to bridging the research-to-practice gap” (p. 1) through joint research activities between researchers and policymakers (p. 1–2). Relatedly, Banks, Herrington and Carter (2017)
refer to a collective process of co-producing impact as “co-impact”, which they define as “an umbrella term referring to the generation of change as a result of individuals, groups and organizations working together” (p. 542). Discussion of co-production in this sense has centered on the relationship between researchers and policymakers, rather than how individual researchers work collectively within research institutions, including as teams within a university department, to create research that can be impactful.

Within the existing literature, it remains to be established how organizational context might in fact influence research impact prospects within university research departments and the ways in which it may do so. We contend that organizational context may be particularly significant for two major reasons:

1. It can support the capacity of researchers to undertake policy-focused and policy-relevant research (by providing material support and a supportive operational environment), thus strengthening impact potential; and
2. It can influence the working culture within a research department and the impact orientation of researchers, working both individually and collectively, to invest time and effort to engage with impact in meaningful ways.

3. The Pacific context

Just as we contend that DPA’s organizational context is an important factor influencing its impact potential, we also consider that the broader Pacific context in which DPA operates has been critical to its capacity to engage with policy processes through its research. The Pacific Islands region is highly diverse and faces a wide range of long-term and often deep-seated developmental challenges. These development challenges have made the region a major focus for development partners. This has driven demand for Pacific research including on the part of the Australian government, the largest aid donor in the region.

The Australian Government has provided long-term funding for research partnerships in the region, support for improved education quality at Pacific tertiary institutions and support for Pacific scholars to study in Australia. It has also provided funding for Australian tertiary institutions to support and undertake Pacific-focused research. Such support includes funding provided through DFAT for the Pacific Research Program (PRP). The PRP is a four-year, $23.25 million research investment being managed by a DPA-led consortium, which also includes the ANU Crawford School of Public Policy’s Development Policy Center and the Lowy Institute. The PRP’s four intended outcomes are to: undertake and publish high quality, policy relevant research; facilitate and foster a network of Pacific researchers; connect with Australia’s broader engagement in the Pacific and build greater awareness of the Pacific in Australia; and contribute to evidence-based policy-making and program design.
4. The Department of Pacific Affairs

Established in 1996 and located within the ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, DPA (formerly the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia (SSGM) Program) is a leading international center for applied multidisciplinary research on issues of governance, state and society in the Pacific.5 Since its inception, DPA has been funded in partnership by the ANU and DFAT and, for a time, AusAID. From 1996 to 2012, AusAID’s relatively modest funding supported the activities and administrative costs of the project, which gradually developed into a standalone program able to enroll higher degree by research students since 2008. An increase in core funding from DFAT for the period 2013–2020 and an increase in ANU funding permitted the establishment of a dedicated operating platform, including program managers, project officers and later a full-time publications editor, alongside additional funds for research and research training. DPA now comprises over 60 researchers, with a staffing profile of 22 academic and eight professional staff, 30 PhD scholars and 15 Visiting Fellows.6

The growth of SSGM and its consolidation in 2017 into a large academic department, with comprehensive research and education (undergraduate and post-graduate) programs, was facilitated by sustained re-investment of research returns generated through grant success and through the strategic leveraging of this investment to bring in additional external funds from other sources to support staff undertaking research and teaching. From the outset, there was an expectation on the part of the Australian Government that its investment, a key objective of which was to address a recognized decline in Pacific expertise and scholarship at Australian universities, would be met with co-investment and co-contributions from the ANU. The resulting partnership has enabled ANU and DFAT to leverage each other’s investments to establish and mature a dedicated department focused on Pacific scholarship and to grow the pool of scholars undertaking high-quality research on the region.

DPA provides a training ground for scholarship on the region to support development of a new cadre of Pacific experts and researchers. Its higher degree research (HDR) program established in 2008 now comprises 30 students.7 The Department also convenes the Bachelor of Pacific Studies – the only degree of its kind offered anywhere in Australia – and currently offers 12 undergraduate, twelve postgraduate, and two HDR courses. Aside from its formal education programs, the department has developed tailored research training programs for researchers from the region that are intended to build research capacity and provide a pathway to further study.

In 2017, DFAT ran a competitive tender process for the PRP. The ANU successfully bid for the program with a DPA-led consortium, which also includes the Crawford School’s Development Policy Centre and the Lowy Institute. The PRP builds on previous support provided by DFAT for Pacific research through DPA, although is extended in its scope, having a greater focus on economic development and enhanced engagement with the Australian public in relation to Pacific affairs. Both the Development Policy Centre and the Lowy Institute play a crucial role in delivering on this expanded scope and functionality.

DPA’s research agenda remains academically independent, however the relationship between DFAT and ANU is characterized by open dialogue to ensure that DPA’s research remains relevant to the needs of policymakers and program designers in
Australia, the Pacific and around the world. DPA has built a track record of conducting policy-relevant research and contributing to policy processes through its research, as acknowledged in formal review documents from the Australian government.8

5. Analysis: organizational context as an impact factor

This section considers the various ways that organizational structure and context have supported DPA’s capacity to undertake impactful research, by looking at five dimensions of organizational context. We have selected these dimensions, which have been identified as significant factors shaping organizational performance in other management and organizational studies literatures, due to their relevance in the light of our specific experience at DPA.6

5.1 Research positioning and the strategic targeting of research priorities

The policy relevance of academic research depends on a range of factors, not least its consequence to policymakers. While not all research is of equal policy relevance, contextual awareness of an organization’s policy environment is essential to identify existing and emerging issues of policy salience. DPA has developed capacity at the organizational level to help it identify research issues of high or emerging policy salience, with a view to enhancing the impact prospects of its research activities, both in terms of individual research outputs and the influence of themed programs of research. For example, DPA has purposefully developed core expertise in disciplinary areas underpinning issues of high policy relevance in a Pacific context. As a multidisciplinary unit with a general area studies focus, DPA researchers approach research, analysis and engagement through a range of disciplinary lenses – for example, political science, law, anthropology, international relations, history and human geography – targeted around core research themes – politics, gender, security, resources and development and bring their disciplinary and subject-matter expertise to bear on a range of discreet development issues in their fields.

Organizationally, DPA has concentrated available resources to support large-scale research projects in areas of high policy interest. A key benefit of the PRP’s design has been the provision of research funding for large-scale research projects, such as national election observations conducted in a number of Pacific Island countries and long-term research on gender-based violence in Papua New Guinea. Within its funding arrangement, DPA has enjoyed scope to pilot innovative research programs with policy relevance and uptake as a key metric. The idea of flagship projects has been particularly useful in building research teams, providing a genuine basis for inter-disciplinary collaboration amongst departmental staff. Importantly, large-scale activities have required a level of operational and academic coordination best supported at an organizational level rather than by an individual academic. Running long-term flagship research projects at an organizational level has also allowed consideration of a research project’s policy implications throughout often long-term research cycles.

It is important to note that DPA’s focus on a specific subset of policy issues that are relevant to the Pacific region – politics, security, development – has not simply been
driven by instrumental factors associated with the PRP (and DFAT’s specific policy interests). Rather, it builds on over two decades of academic specialization, informed by ANU’s role as a national university with a broader historical commitment to helping Australian policymakers understand the Pacific region. The correlation of DPA’s historical research focus with DFAT’s policy priorities has certainly played to DPA’s scholarly strengths, however it is also the case that this external funding has been provided in a way that has allowed DPA to build its scholarly agenda. For example, the PRP supports scholarship that is relevant to policymakers and program designers. It does not proscribe specific research activities to be undertaken by the PRP consortium. As such it has enabled the establishment of a research agenda that accords with the parameters of a research-focused university department. In turn, a university-based consortium has provided an effective institutional platform to support impact-focused research.

5.2 Building impactful research teams

Management literature has long recognized the importance of effective teamwork in supporting organizational performance. It is probable, therefore, that the staffing composition and working arrangements within university departments will influence research impact prospects, to the degree that impact is a stated organizational objective. Delivering on the commitments associated with a large policy-focused research grant has required DPA to think strategically about its staff composition and the way in which departmental staff work collectively to undertake research and to communicate research findings. Three issues have been particularly important in DPA’s ability to conduct impactful research.

First, DPA has sought to recruit a multidisciplinary research team with academic and policy expertise. DPA has emphasized policy relevance alongside academic experience when recruiting academic staff and has recruited with a view to supporting a research program focusing on a range of issues related to politics, security and development. DPA’s focus on policy engagement has also seen it recruit policy fellows with substantial applied public policy and research experience relevant to DPA’s research and teaching priorities. This breadth of combined research and policy experience has ensured DPA’s access to policy networks. It has also supported DPA in conducting research on salient policy issues and to effectively communicate research findings, including through outputs that are useful to policy audiences.

Second, DPA has devoted significant attention to the recruitment of what may be called “non-traditional” staff, with a view to bolstering impact prospects. One of the key ways DPA has done this is through the recruitment of non-academic staff with professional experience in aid management and policy outreach, including a program manager, communications and outreach manager, and staff with financial management and (aid) project management experience. Recruitment of these non-traditional staff has required flexibility from a university perspective, given these role functions have stretched the bounds of standard administrative and research staff position descriptions.
DPA’s ability to recruit creatively has been aided in part by the need to service a large-scale contract, such as the PRP grant. For example, the need to report on progress in achieving a range of high-level program outcomes has required DPA to develop more sophisticated monitoring and evaluation processes, which assess and communicate research impact from a policymaker’s perspective. Having departmental staff with aid management experience has been beneficial in terms of assessing the broader impact of DPA’s scholarship and promoting policy relevance of scholarship in accessible outputs. Program funding for dedicated project managers, whose time can be allocated flexibly, has supported DPA to operationalize large-scale research projects, such as DPA’s large-scale election studies in several Pacific countries, which have become a central element of the department’s study of politics and governance.

Third, DPA has worked to organize its staff in ways that enhance research impact prospects. The principal way this has been done is by supporting the formation of research teams to undertake large-scale research projects. These teams have been comprised of scholars with relevant research expertise, policy fellows with relevant policy experience, and professional or nontraditional support staff with relevant program and project management expertise. Key to this approach has been the idea that all members of a research team have a research role, meaning that program management and policy staff participate in all stages of the research process including research formulation and design, implementation and analysis and communication. The formation of teams has helped mainstream the idea of impact by ensuring policy-experienced staff are involved at the research design and implementation phases of a project, increasing the policy relevance of core research questions and approaches. This has helped position DPA to engage in creative ways throughout the research cycle. The formation of research teams has also enabled DPA to undertake research at a scale not otherwise possible. For example, having a project manager with aid management experience embedded in a research project team has helped conduct complex fieldwork at scale, typically involving a range of local research partners.

5.3 Organizational culture

Cultivating a culture that embraces research impact as a central priority has been an objective of DPA’s management and staff. Organizational culture — “a set of core values, behavioral norms, artifacts and behavioral patterns which govern the way people in an organization interact with each other and invest energy in their jobs and the organization at large” (Van Muijen et al. 1992, p.250) – has been found to be a significant factor supporting organizational performance. Building an organizational culture of shared goals and values can contribute to teamwork and cooperation leading to improved performance. Guest (1994) has highlighted how a range of management practices including selection, socialization and training can support the emergence of shared norms, values and informal rules within organizations that enhance performance prospects. Management has been found to play a particularly important role in culture formation (Schein 1992).

DPA’s approach to impact has been underpinned by a departmental research culture in which policy engagement and impact are regarded as an intrinsic part of its research
endavors. Organizationally, this is supported in a range of ways. Recruitment processes have placed importance on policy engagement as a core selection criterion, alongside more traditional academic performance metrics. The nature of DPA’s applied research has attracted research staff with a strong commitment to policy-focused research, many of whom have lived and worked in the region for extended periods and are motivated by the opportunity to help support Pacific communities. Beyond professional qualifications and lived experiences, staff share a common motivation to undertake applied research on issues of emerging priority. DPA has also sought to make its research publicly available to a region that experiences significant barriers to accessing research published on subscription-only platforms. Funding provided through the PRP grant supports a range of publication and outreach platforms that enable DPA researchers to communicate their research with Pacific stakeholders and, importantly, opportunities for Pacific Islander researchers to publish their work.

The development of a strong impact culture has not been without its challenges. One particularly significant challenge has been the need to develop incentive structures that place equal value on academic research and policy engagement, so as to avoid unnecessary demarcation between scholarship and policy engagement. It has also required a concerted approach to research design that combines policy engagement activities alongside academic and policy research outputs throughout the research cycle so that staff are afforded equal time to produce policy and academic outputs on the basis of extensive fieldwork. In practice, finding time to focus on this range of outputs remains a work in progress.

5.4 Departmental governance

DPA’s governance structure has been shaped by the need to manage a large externally-funded grant within the context of a broader university department. DPA has a management team comprised of the Head of Department (who is also the Lead of the PRP), a Program Manager and two other senior researchers. The DPA management team and representatives from the PRP consortium meet on a quarterly basis with counterparts in DFAT to report on activities under the PRP. The HOD also represents the department within the ANU. DPA has used the PRP’s prescribed annual planning, reporting and risk management processes as the basis for its broader departmental governance, adapting these processes so they are compatible with broader university requirements.

Regular dialogue with DFAT through the governance mechanism has provided DPA’s management team with an understanding of the emerging policy environment (in addition to the strong policy relationships brought to DPA in their own areas of specialization), which has in turn informed its identification of research opportunities of high policy relevance. It has also allowed DPA to test interest in research activities with a policy audience. This governance structure has also been important to DPA’s impact approach in a number of other ways. One of the most important has been in helping DPA manage the issue of academic independence and integrity. DPA’s governance structure has been established to support a strong partnership with DFAT, while promoting and ensuring DPA’s academic independence. This arrangement is best
reflected in the contractual understanding that DFAT does not direct research activities, which remains critical to DPA’s ability to serve as a trusted partner in the region.

DPA’s governance structure has also sought to address perceived tensions between academic scholarship and “policy impact” by approaching the issue of policy as part of a broader process of scholarship. While PRP resources must be used to achieve identified program objectives, there is in fact considerable, natural overlap between the “policy” agendas PRP is broadly interested in and the academic research agendas pursued by DPA’s scholars. For example, election-focused research supported under the PRP has both significant policy relevance and is central to broader scholarship on politics and governance in Melanesia.

Reliance on significant external funding has required DPA to develop risk management protocols, which have in turn supported its capacity to undertake often sensitive but impactful research. DPA researchers must adhere to university ethical standards when conducting research as a standard requirement. But the policy focus of much of DPA research has also required systematic management of risks associated with researching politically sensitive policy issues. This had made DPA particularly attuned to the active management of policy-related risks, including through early investments in strong partnerships with local research stakeholders and, at the organizational level, between DPA and regional research institutions. The formation of strong local partnerships has been particularly important not only in managing country-specific risks, but also in opening channels for policy engagement that would otherwise not be available to external researchers.

DPA’s overall approach to impact has also been shaped by the need to systematically report on program results with respect to the PRP. As an aid-funded program, DPA has had to establish a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework to measure PRP activity against a range of performance criteria including research quality and quantity, but also policy impact. DPA has resources to support its M&E reporting, which has had broader benefit across DPA’s range of research and teaching activities. The M&E process has aligned to some degree with broader university impact processes such as the ARC impact framework but has required a more regular impact assessment throughout the program cycle.

**5.5 A vision of sustainable growth**

From an organizational perspective, a vision of sustainable growth has been an important factor in supporting DPA’s evolution. The establishment of a dedicated Pacific department was part of a long-term strategy to address a decline in Pacific studies across Australia. In this context, demonstrating research impact was identified as necessary to secure supplementary funding to support the growth of Pacific scholarship. Early gains in securing financial support for policy-focused research enabled the expansion of scholarly research capacity and the capacity to undertake undergraduate and post-graduate teaching. This strategy was reinforced by university funding formulas that provided research dividends to academic units based on external funding levels. Through this approach, DPA has succeeded in leveraging external funding to support a
range of more traditional academic activities, from scholarly research to teaching and outreach.

One important governance challenge facing DPA has been how to reconcile a process of organizational growth driven by significant external grant funding with the requirements of an independent university research department. External funding represents both a challenge and vulnerability, and as such DPA has undertaken a concerted revenue diversification process, including from more regular sources such as teaching and research returns. It has also leveraged external funds to scale up university investments in teaching and scholarship.

It is noteworthy that the PRP grant is more than an instrumental policy research program. It broadly seeks to support a more vital ecology of Pacific scholarship. Indeed, key PRP objectives, such as training the next generation of Pacific scholars, can arguably only be delivered by a university department with significant scholarship credentials. While DPA could not have evolved without long-term external funding, it is not the case that external funding has determined its approach to research. Rather, ANU has co-invested in DPA to leverage PRP resources to support the establishment of a university department. This is clearly illustrated in the growth of DPA’s teaching program, which has expanded to include Australia’s only Bachelor of Pacific Studies and a large-scale postgraduate teaching program. PRP staff play an active role in teaching. Research funded by PRP often plays an important role in informing teaching curriculum. So too, having access to a policy-focused funding stream has unequivocally improved DPA’s impact prospects, providing DPA resources to undertake long-term policy-focused research projects and activities that would otherwise not be possible.

6. Conclusion: Inherently impactful research programs

Using select literature derived from management and organizational studies, this article has sought to show how organizational context can be an important factor supporting impact potential of university research departments. The organizational structure of a university research department – including its recruitment, research-policy positioning, governance and leadership, organizational culture and organizational partnerships – can support research impact objectives by creating incentives and systems to support research and research approaches that are likely to be more policy impactful.

A key lesson from this case study is that DPA’s research program has been impactful in part because of strategic prioritization of research impact as an organizational goal and the development of commensurate operational structures (staffing, governance systems, resource allocations etc.) that support this objective. DPA’s reliance on a large, externally-funded research grant with strong policy-focused objectives has supported the impact potential of the department both by strengthening organizational links with a key policy community and providing flexible funding and operational imperatives that have required DPA to prioritize policy impact in its research agenda and approach. Indeed, we would argue that organizational structure has made DPA “inherently” impactful, by creating a strong research culture that is predisposed to undertaking research that is policy relevant while more actively managing potential
academic risks arising from partial reliance on large external policy focused research grant.

A key question arising from this case study is whether the lessons learned can be replicated across university research departments, or whether DPA’s reliance on a large external grant with a Pacific focus represents a unique situation that cannot be generalized. While the need to service the PRP contract has provided DPA with scope to pioneer “non-traditional” organizational approaches, we argue that the lessons identified have resulted from specific strategic management decisions and can be replicated, to varying degrees, in other university research departments. In particular, we argue that thinking strategically about potentially high impact areas of research, pooling discretionary departmental resources to invest in “flagship” activities supported by inter-disciplinary teams, strengthening incentives at the departmental level to elevate the importance ascribed to impact throughout the research cycle, active management to build a collective culture of impact and support the establishment of targeted partnerships as a beachhead for research impact are all within the remit of university departments. What is required to achieve this is an elevation of managerial focus so that research is approached as something more than an individual responsibility, and a recognition of the myriad ways in which impact can be strengthened by supporting an organizational approach to research activities.

One important implication of our research is that university administrations interested in improving impact outcomes should include organizational context as an important consideration in their impact strategies and should work with research departments to strengthen their organizational capacities to undertake impactful research. Such approaches would ideally focus greater attention on how to build departmental cultures that value impactful research as a shared goal, seek to pool (often limited) discretionary funding to support high impact-potential research activities, and involve recruitment strategies that help departments form multidisciplinary research teams that will strengthen impact prospects by conducting research that is both of high scholarly quality and policy relevance. They should also better recognize the inter-relationship between “policy-focused” research and associated external policy funding opportunities, and how external funding can be used in productive ways to reinforce more traditional scholarly research activities pursued by university research departments. This requires a more sophisticated approach to the reflexive binary which tends to dominate how policy focused research is regarded as something that is somehow less scholarly.

Notes

1. Julien Barbara is a Senior Policy Fellow at DPA. Prior to joining DPA he worked in a variety of policy positions at DFAT and AusAID. Nicole Haley heads the DFAT-funded Pacific Research Program and was head of DPA from 2008-2021. Hannah McMahon is DPA’s Program Manager and Timothea Turnbull is its Program Manager, Research Communication and Outreach.

2. By collective endeavor, we mean research that is conducted by groups of researchers as part of a research team. Collective research can be conducted by a group of researchers within a single organizational unit such as a research department, and or by a team of researchers from multiple departments and/or organizations. For the purposes of this
article, we are primarily interested in collective research conducted by researchers from within a single organizational unit – in this case, a university department – given this article is focused on organizational influences on impact prospects.

3. The Pacific region comprises 22 countries and territories and hundreds of islands spread over a vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean. The region’s population of over 10 million people is culturally and linguistically diverse. For example, Papua New Guinea alone, the region’s most populous country, has over 800 indigenous languages. This diversity, a source of distinctiveness and identity for many, also represents a governance challenge where it correlates with a weak sense of national identity. In some states, locally-driven reform processes, including decentralization, continue to drive changes in the nature of the state. Pacific island countries’ remoteness from major markets and relatively small economies present barriers to economic growth and employment prospects for its young people. The region’s population is notably young, with at least half the region’s population aged under 23 (Wilson 2020). Many countries in the region are experiencing rapid rates of urbanization, placing additional pressures on land, resources and services in urban centers. Furthermore, the region remains especially vulnerable to natural disasters and the effects of climate change.

4. The newfound development attention afforded the Pacific is demonstrated by the increased proportion of Australian aid program funding allocated to the Pacific region relative to other regions and through key whole of government initiatives developed under Australia’s Pacific Step Up. The latter sets out Australia’s intent to “engage with the Pacific with greater intensity and ambition, deliver more integrated and innovative policy and make further, substantial long-term investments in the region’s development (Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2017, pg. 101).

5. Scholarship focused on Pacific states, societies and governance has long been important to the Australian Government, as demonstrated by the inclusion of a Research School of Pacific Studies in the founding Act of the Australian National University, the Australian National University Act 1946.

6. DPA’s researchers have academic backgrounds in political science, anthropology, geography, human geography, law, gender studies, development studies and international relations. Key areas of enquiry include urbanization, conflict, violence, state-building, service delivery, politics and identity, gender, geopolitics and regional diplomacy.

7. Of the 20 students who have graduated from the program to date, 75 per cent have obtained employment in Australian and Pacific universities – including four with DPA - while the remaining five are employed by the Australian Government, the PNG Government or by development partners within the Pacific.

8. A 2009 external review funded by AusAID, found that SSGM was “making a valuable contribution to strengthening the capacity of Pacific Islands scholars and institutions, engaging in effective research and policy dialogue on contemporary governance issues with Australian and regional academics, whole-of-government, civil society, and government; and supporting informed policy and research engagement on Pacific issues” (Australian Agency for International Development 2009, p.13). A 2015 external evaluation of DFAT’s research investments found that there has “been good uptake of SSGM research into DFAT policy and strategy in regional gender programs…” (Office of Development Effectiveness 2015, p.29). More recently, DPA has demonstrated its capacity to contribute to Pacific Island governments’ policy review and planning processes through its research. For example, speaking at the launch of DPA’s 2019 Solomon Islands National General Elections (NGE) Observation report in February 2020 in Honiara, the speaker of the Solomon Islands National Parliament and Chair of the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission, Hon. Patteson Oti, explained that the findings presented in the report “have provided us with credible, in-depth information that will help us to effectively implement our Electoral Reform Strategic Framework 2019-2023”, adding “[m]any of your recommendations, if not all, will be fed into the development of
detailed Implementation Plans for the delivery of the Electoral Reform Strategic Framework during this election cycle.”

9. Factors such as team composition, staff competency, team management structures and team-work processes have been found to impact on the ability of an organization to achieve its goals (Katzenbach and Smith 1993; Kozlowski and Ilgen 2006; Boxall and Macky 2007).

10. In the case of DPA, a number of senior academic staff have had significant careers in the Australian foreign service and/or international development, including working at senior levels within DFAT in the Pacific region. For example, DPA’s Deputy Director is a former senior diplomat who has held senior posts at Australian missions across the south west Pacific, while the PRP Deputy Team Leader is a former diplomat and aid professional who has managed aid programs in the Pacific.

11. Another important innovation has been the location of dedicated professional staff within the department. The location of key professional staff within the department such as the program manager and communications and outreach manager has ensured they have developed an intimate understanding of DPA’s research objectives and approach. It has also made it possible to embed such staff in specific research projects. This has allowed DPA to be more strategic and opportunistic in its impact approach.

12. Organizational governance refers to the ‘rules that shape organizational action’ (Klein, Mahoney, McGahan and Pitelis 2019, p.6). Such rules can be formal (e.g. formal operating procedures) and informal (e.g. organizational norms and values). Governance systems help form an organizational structure that guides organizations in the pursuit of their objectives, both in terms of the allocation of resources to achieve operational objectives and even the determination of their organizational objectives. ‘Collectively, governance rules establish the organization as an entity distinct from the individuals whose activities make up the firm.’ (Klein, Mahoney, McGahan and Pitelis, 2019, p.9).

Disclosure statement

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