



UCD School of Politics  
and International Relations  
Research & Innovation Committee

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25 April '08

Dear Ken and Michael

The Committee on Research and Innovation of the School of Politics and International Relations, UCD, has considered your request for our assistance in the compilation of data for your article on the academic impact of colleagues in Politics departments on the island of Ireland. The committee's response may be summarised as follows.

We share your desire to further the development of the discipline, including bibliometric measurement of achievement. However we have serious reservations about the way in which you have approached the design and dissemination of your draft report. Please see our attached statement of principles, procedures and practice.

We urge that a dedicated committee of the PSAI, including both of you and a number of political scientists from other subfields and other institutions, direct the data collection from this point on. The PSAI should be asked to fund research assistance for this enterprise. This is important because your initiative is not just a scientific exercise but one with significant implications for our relationship with funding bodies and government agencies, and thus of collective professional concern. The PSAI could provide an institutional basis for updating the information on a regular basis, and it would allow for trans-institutional cooperation. It would also give greater legitimacy to the project—quite as important for those who do well on the measures as for those who do not. This should not unduly lengthen the time frame for completion: inclusion of the cited reference search already requires considerable research assistance and cannot be completed reliably within the initial time frame; research assistance from PSAI will speed the process. We are sure that PSAI would be willing to respond immediately to such a call and we would urge it to do so.

Given a revised time frame we are willing to participate and cooperate fully in the enterprise.

Yours sincerely

Professor Jennifer Todd  
Chair, Research and Innovation Committee



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## **Response to Draft Research Impact Assessment Exercise in Ireland by Professors Benoit and Marsh (18 April 2008), 25 April 2008**

1. The strongest reservations should be stated about the draft bibliometric measures which were recently published prior to any consultation with colleagues. The principle of research assessment and of conducting this by bibliometric methods where appropriate is not in question. Indeed, this process is particularly important, since it has potential implications for university rankings and future funding. For this reason, an island-wide initiative should involve the participation of our professional association, the PSAI. Wide consultation as to measures and instruments is essential, although we accept that full agreement on assessment instruments might not be forthcoming.
2. Weighty reservations about the procedures followed by Professors Benoit and Marsh must clearly be stated. They conducted the exercise according to their own criteria, published the results on the web at the level of individual scholars, and then put it up to departments and individuals to “correct” their entries by their deadline, and to prove that their proposed amendments are “correct” by producing appropriate documentation. Two versions of the assessment of individual scholars have already been made publicly available on the web in non-retractable form, in that they will have been archived by Google and other web archiving agencies, and the current one may easily be downloaded. In SPIRe, we would hesitate to make data of this kind on our own school members available in this form even internally within the school; but Benoit and Marsh have chosen to do so for more than 100 colleagues in a quasi-permanent public forum, in effect offering different criteria for ranking them, and with a clear implication of a big gap between the (named) excellent and the (named) research-inactive scholars.
3. The initially published measures relied on easily available data sources whose inadequacy as research assessment instruments is widely acknowledged, though we appreciate that these lend themselves to quick and relatively painless enquiry. The most central and best developed instrument, the Web of Science, has been widely criticised on the grounds that it has clear disciplinary, linguistic and regional biases, resulting in profound dissatisfaction with it in the UK and at European level. We note that, for this reason, the British ESRC has recently proposed that European research councils collaborate in the creation of a more satisfactory database for output and citation analysis. Three of the disciplinary biases are particularly obvious, and set the physical sciences, for instance, sharply apart from the humanities; but they are also of great importance within our own discipline, where they correspond to the distinction

between such areas as electoral behaviour (like psychology and economics, close to the “science” end) and political philosophy (like history and sociology, close to the “humanities” end):

- a preference for journal articles rather than books as publication outlets
- a practice of collaborative, multi-authored research and publication, rather than a norm of individual scholarship and single-authored publication
- a culture of extensive mutual citation, rather than reliance on original data and sources.

The outcome is that this piece of research is systematically biased against important subfields in the discipline. Use of Google Scholar and Web of Science cited reference search may help in rectifying the first of these sources of bias, that against books (but it does not resolve the matter). The second can be rectified by controlling for the number of authors. The third is a fundamental difficulty in any undertaking of the kind attempted here, but one which cannot simply be ignored. Research assessment should be carried out in a way which recognises the full breadth of our discipline, not one which prioritises particular subfields. How this is to be accomplished is a difficult question that requires much greater consultation than has thus far taken place.

4. The initial table uses defective instruments. In using the Web of Science it is entirely unclear why Benoit and Marsh confined themselves to citations of articles in Web of Science journals only, when that database allows for analysis of citations (admittedly, only in Web of Science journals) to articles in a much wider range of journals, to books, and to other types of publication. In recognising the need for such an approach, Benoit and Marsh have opened the way to wider professional cooperation with what otherwise would have been a biased enterprise. The extensive work involved in filtering the cited reference results reliably will require considerable time.
5. This exercise needs fully and explicitly to acknowledge its own partial nature. First, it is directed at citation analysis, not output analysis: for the latter, there exists a range of long-standing instruments such as the *International Bibliography of the Social Sciences* and (for articles) the *International Political Science Abstracts*. Second, because of the built-in sub-field bias, it needs to accept the extent to which bibliometric analysis might be modified by peer review.