



# THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES TO GOVERNMENT

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# THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES TO GOVERNMENT

## A BRIEF REVIEW

### Abstract

*Social policy is concerned with a range of human needs and the social institutions created to meet these needs. The social sciences cover a wide array of complex issues and disciplines. Government activities are now centrally related to social policy and the boundaries between social, economic and science policy are blurred. Commonwealth Government expenditure on social security and welfare, health and education amounts to some 65% of total expenditure and indicates the importance and persuasiveness of social policies. The social sciences and policies are important in ensuring the maintenance and functioning of a stable society by attempting to provide a more equitable distribution of wealth and income and ensuring an understanding of governance and institutions of civil society. Universities play a key role in providing social science courses which educate graduates in the philosophy, knowledge and the new developments of social science. This enables government agencies to access skilled social scientists who are capable of developing and implementing new social science policies appropriate to meet the needs of an ever changing world.*



### 1.0 Introduction

The social sciences cover a wide array of complex issues and disciplines. The purpose of this brief paper is to illustrate the importance of the social sciences to government. The paper is not therefore intended as an in-depth analysis of the significance of research and teaching in the social sciences or of their importance in policy development at government level, but rather to demonstrate their significance by reference to four of the larger sectors of government expenditure. These four sectors are health, education, social security and welfare. In the second section, as an introduction to the scope and importance of social policy and social sciences, a broad definition is provided. In the third section, current government expenditure on health, education, social security and welfare is identified. The fourth section discusses the importance of the social sciences to a modern Australian democratic society, and the last section examines the role of social science policy and identifies some of the more recent important policy developments.

### 2.0 Social Sciences: A Broad Definition

Before attempting to assess the importance of the social sciences to government, it is necessary to define, or at least try to set the parameters of this broad area of study. The difficulty stems from the fact that social issues and arrangements flow into all human organisations even if their function is not directly related to the social sciences. The distinction between economic and social policies is blurred and there are a number of definitions of social policy and the social sciences.

For example, Rein argues that social policy is basically concerned with the range of human needs and the social institutions created to meet them<sup>(1)</sup>. This definition implies that the range of matters covered by the social sciences is extensive and that government policy in this area flows into almost all avenues of human life.

Based on this broad definition a listing of the main social sciences and policy areas would include:



- health;
- education;
- social security and welfare;
- justice, law and order;
- the family and children;
- multiculturalism;
- ethics, human rights and equal opportunity;
- social accounting;
- income and wealth distribution;
- the trade-off between equity and efficiency;
- the equitable distribution of resources;
- housing and community services;
- labour relations and conditions of employment; and
- provision of power, water, gas and other essential services and infrastructure such as urban public transport.

Such a list indicates that almost the entire area of economic and social policy is central to government policies aimed at influencing social issues of the day which range for example from Aboriginal land rights to pension and taxation policy. This broad definition implies that almost all government activity is related to social policy in that it is dealing with virtually the entire range of human needs and social institutions and organisations that operate to meet these needs. However government tends to recognise and define the major social policy areas as covering health, education, social security and welfare.

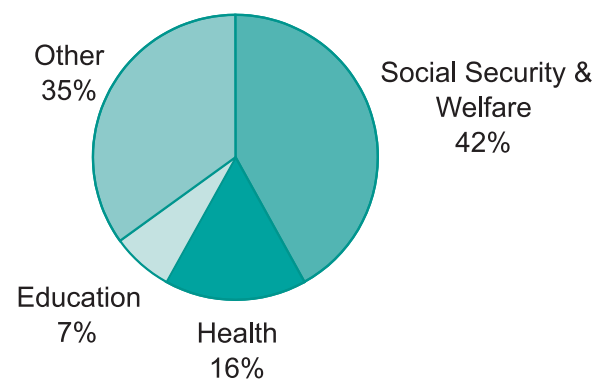
For the purposes of illustrating the significance of social sciences to government, this paper focuses on a more narrow range of the social sciences and social policy in the areas of health, education, social security and welfare.

### 3.0 Government Expenditure on Social Science Policy

One way of attempting to assess the importance of these social policy areas for governments is by identifying the level of funding provided through annual budgetary allocations. Unfortunately, the estimation of this expenditure is by no means easy from a perusal of the budget papers. This is due in part to these functions being split between a number of government departments at both Commonwealth and State level. Moreover, Commonwealth departments incur expenditure and administer grants and allocations to the States and institutions.

A broad approximation is given of the Commonwealth Government's expenditure in this area in the Budget Overview Paper for 2000/01<sup>(2)</sup> which identifies the budget allocation as shown in the following chart.

#### COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURE 2000/2001 (%)

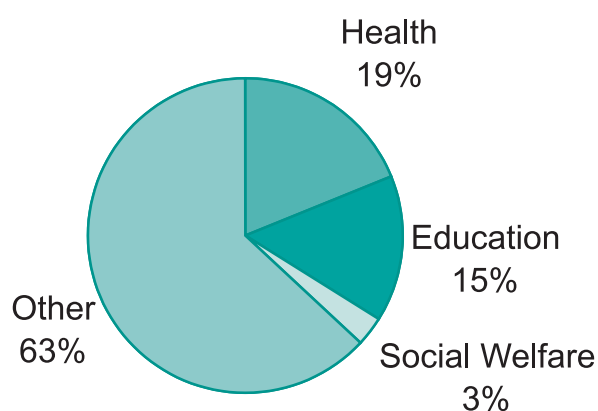


Expenditure on social security and welfare, health and education equates to some 65% or \$98 billion of the 2000/01 budget expenditure of \$151 billion.

The situation at the State level is different as the Commonwealth has the major funding responsibilities in these three areas. Nevertheless, expenditure on health, education and social welfare

is a significant proportion of total budget expenditure. Take Western Australia as an example, where the State budget papers<sup>(3)</sup> indicate that of the total expenditure of \$9.8 billion, health, education and social welfare expenditure amounts to \$3.7 billion as shown in the following chart.

**WESTERNAUSTRALIAN EXPENDITURE 2000/2001 (%)**



Thus expenditure on health, education and social welfare amounts to over 37% of total budget expenditure. The difference in the proportion of expenditure on these areas between the Commonwealth and Western Australian Governments is in the most part due to the Commonwealth having responsibility for funding pensions and the major responsibility in funding health and education.

#### 4.0 The Importance of the Social Sciences

The physical and natural sciences are important to our understanding of the world and the use and development of technology and techniques in for example agriculture manufacturing, mining, and environmental protection and rehabilitation. While the previous section has focused only on the areas of health, education, social security and welfare, it is a broader spectrum of the social sciences that will enable human groups, whether at a local or

global level, to function in health and well being by providing opportunities and a more equitable distribution of wealth and income to the betterment of all members of society.

The importance of the social science can be indicated by listing some of the core areas of the social science professions and disciplines. These include:

- enhancement of physical and mental health;
- treatment of diseases, ailments and a large number of health conditions;
- identifying dietary needs and nutritious foods;
- identifying the living conditions needed for a healthy life;
- provision of education at primary, secondary and tertiary level;
- development of and training for new skills and training to enhance people's capabilities;
- ensuring the availability of social welfare, such as disability and old age pensions, assistance for families and the disadvantaged;
- attempting to ensure that there is a reasonably equitable distribution of the economic wealth of a nation through taxation and other redistributive mechanisms;
- providing social justice through legal and administrative actions;
- promoting ethical practice and sound governance;
- preservation of law and order;
- protection of minors and disadvantaged groups;
- ensuring a safe working environment and appropriate working conditions; and
- provision of the necessities of life in areas such as water, power, gas and transport;



- ensuring high standards of public sector management; and
- working in an interdisciplinary manner on issues involving socio-economic policies, regional development, environmental development, globalisation and science and technology policies.

This, not exhaustive list, demonstrates how important the social sciences are for a modern stable and democratic society that Australia enjoys. The role of the Universities in providing social sciences courses is critical to ensuring that social science philosophy, knowledge and new developments are passed on to the next generation of graduates and to society. This in turn enables government agencies to access well trained and skilled social scientists capable of developing and implementing new social policies and programmes to meet the needs of a changing world.



The importance of the social sciences is further highlighted when there is consideration of the numerous applied research activities undertaken by Universities. At Edith Cowan University, for example, recent research projects include:

**Education:**

Applied research conducted through ECU's Institute for the Service Professions harnesses research teams, often interdisciplinary works with industry partners on challenges confronting for example, the education, nursing, indigenous, social work and youth areas.

Recent research includes a cross National study of the effect on extending parental choice of schooling on curriculum pedagogy and school organisations, generating better educational and employment outcomes for rural young people, teacher evaluation in Australia and the current policies and practices and their relation to the improvement of teaching and learning, the assessment of School Principals' Performance, the state of teaching and learning of

Science in Primary and Secondary Schools, Literacy development in schools and the validation of professional standards and performance.

**Health:**

ECU's Cancer and Palliative Care Research Group undertakes applied externally funded projects which aims to develop knowledge to improve the care of individuals and families of the terminally ill. Projects include the evaluation of the innovative model of respite care for terminally ill patients receiving care at home.

ECU's research on health promotion focuses on public health issues facing communities and ways of promoting health and wellbeing in communities and individuals which includes the study of gambling behaviour as a public issue, substance abuse in older women and HIV education for teachers of school aged children.

**Regional:**

The University is actively involved in a range of applied projects which focus on socio-economic issues in the region. For example, the Centre for Regional Development on the South West campus research includes parent education programs for low income families and an interagency early intervention preventative approach to community development which ensures resources are used strategically and effectively to reduce the level of youth alienation, substance abuse and violent crimes.

**5.0 The Role of Social Science Policy**

Governments through the development of social science policies provide for the betterment of their citizens and the maintenance of a stable society composed of healthy, educated and a contented population. The importance of an equitable social policy cannot be underestimated as history tells us





that where some sections of society are not receiving their fair share of wealth and income, then the seeds of unrest and revolution are sown.

In Australia, there is a long history of government involvement in social policies, for example Australia was the first country to introduce the old age pension, and State governments were active very early on in the provision of infrastructure such as hospitals railways, water and power, although much of this involvement would have been undertaken under the banner of economic development policy rather than social policy.

In more recent times, certainly since the Whitlam Government in the early 1970s, Commonwealth Governments of all persuasions have been very active in the development of social policies. Some examples include:

- the development of a universal free health care system (Medicare);
- the greater role of the Commonwealth Government in funding of public hospitals;
- the provision of the old age pension set at a minimum of 25% of average weekly earnings;
- the provision of an array of family payments to assist in providing for children;
- the provision of payments for those without work and funding for retraining;

- the assistance to old age care and funding for nursing homes;
- the dominant role of the Commonwealth Government in tertiary funding of Universities and increasing role in TAFEs; and
- the development of new taxation policies to reduce the reliance on income tax.

Thus the role of social science policy, although perhaps not widely recognised as important as economic policy, is crucial to the maintenance of the Australian democratic system. Its importance can be further illustrated by the long debate over the implications that the GST would have on those on pensions or fixed incomes and those generally recognised as being economically disadvantaged. During the debate, the social policy implications became a key determinant for government being able to muster the necessary support in Parliament to pass the legislation introducing the new tax regime.

#### References

- (1) Rein, M. (1976), *Social Science and Public Policy*, New York: Penguin Books Ltd, p 20.
- (2) Commonwealth Government (2000), *Budget Overview, 9 May 2000*, Canberra: Government Printer.
- (3) Western Australian Government (2000), *2000-01 Economic and Fiscal Outlook, Budget Paper No 1 May 2000*, Perth: State Treasury Department.



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It is a forum where leaders of Australia's business, research and academic communities can examine important issues of mutual interest, to improve the interaction between Australian business and higher education institutions, and to guide the future directions of higher education.

In pursuing this mission BHERT aims to influence public opinion and both government and non-government policy on selected issues of importance.

B-HERT believes that a prerequisite for a more prosperous and equitable society in Australia is a more highly-educated community. In material terms it fosters economic growth and improved living standards - through improved productivity and competitiveness with other countries. In terms of equity, individual Australians should have the opportunity to realise their full social, cultural, political and economic potential.

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B-HERT pursues a number of activities through its Working Groups, State Chapters and active alliances with relevant organisations both domestically and internationally. It publishes a regular newsletter (B-HERT NEWS), reporting on its activities and current issues of concern relevant to its Mission.

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