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Publisher: Routledge

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Australian Journal of Political Science

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cajp20>

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Published online: 11 Dec 2013.

To cite this article: Glenn Kefford & Lee Morgenbesser (2013) Bridging the information gap: A survey of politics and international relations PhD students in Australia, Australian Journal of Political Science, 48:4, 507-518, DOI: [10.1080/10361146.2013.840431](https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2013.840431)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2013.840431>

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Research note

Bridging the information gap: A survey of politics and international relations PhD students in Australia

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This article analyses the results of the first exclusive survey of politics and international relations PhD students in Australia. The survey was completed by 186 students from 22 universities. Students were asked 54 questions covering five areas: candidate choices, degree structure, research interests, workload pressures and the role of the Australian Political Studies Association (APSA). Our findings indicate that students base their choice of institution on pre-existing personal relationships rather than university reputation or research expertise; want more coursework and methodological training; believe scholarship-application outcomes are not based on merit; feel they cannot meet the field's workload expectations; and are unaware of APSA. This article raises important questions about the opportunities and support that individual academics, departments and university administrations provide to potential and existing students.

Keywords: Australia; international relations; PhD students; politics; survey

Introduction

This article analyses the results of a nationwide survey of politics and international relations (IR) PhD students in Australia. Previous research has sampled the experiences of postgraduate students, but only at the more general level of the social-science discipline (see Denholm and Evans 2006; Neumann 2003; Pearson et al. 2011). This survey, commissioned by the Australian Political Studies Association (APSA), is the first to deal exclusively with politics and IR students. It sought students' views on a wide range of issues, including choices regarding candidature, as well as degree structure, research, the profession and workload. Until now, information about PhD students has been limited to the practices of particular universities

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or to informal discussions between students and staff. There has been no way of knowing what kind of support students require at a national level, or even their openness to such support. In addition, the survey revealed a degree of confusion about the varying, and often contradictory, expectations applied to students. This article, therefore, poses several questions about how individual academics, IR and politics departments and university administrations approach potential and existing students.

This article focuses on five major issues raised by the survey. First, it offers insights into some of the choices made by incoming PhD students, including why they select a particular university or supervisor. The evidence shows that a strong personal relationship with an existing scholar is the most influential factor guiding their decisions. The second section focuses on the structure of the doctoral degree. We find that students generally believe that they have not received enough methodological training, and one in three students does not know the epistemological approach informing their research. The third section analyses students' research, including their sub-field, topic area and method. It assesses the similarities and differences between academics and students using results from the Teaching Research and International Policy (TRIP) survey, which explored the views of academics across 20 countries.

The fourth section examines the pressure experienced by PhD students around Australia. Students expect to work in a stressful environment, but they are concerned by the ever-increasing expectations of the field. Therefore, they are pessimistic about their ability to gain future academic employment, either domestically or internationally. The final section discusses the role of APSA in enhancing the experience of PhD students. It suggests initiatives that the association could offer students at a national level. For this to be possible, however, APSA must raise its profile among doctoral students, given that the survey showed that a majority were simply unaware of the organisation. Before addressing these central findings, we discuss how the survey was designed, as well as the key demographics of PhD students in Australia.

Survey design and demographics

The survey sought the views of PhD students in the fields of politics and/or IR. Participants had an active affiliation with an Australian university and were currently enrolled in the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. We sent an invitation to participate to the administrative staff of 49 departments, research centres and schools in Australia, who then forwarded it to eligible students. Thus, in a two-stage sampling process, we selected relevant institutions and staff, and then selected suitable students. This process captured students studying mainstream politics and IR, as well as those at the margins doing interdisciplinary research. Overall, 186 students responded to the survey. It is impossible to know what percentage of the student body this sample represents since there is no definitive list of active PhD students. Nonetheless, the sample represents a substantial proportion of any future professional workforce, given that the latest estimate of political scientists working across all universities in Australia is 402 (Weller and Cowan 2012: 306).

We received responses from 22 universities, with most coming from the Australian National University (29), and least from James Cook University, the University of Canberra, the University of Newcastle, the University of Technology Sydney and the University of the Sunshine Coast (1). The sample included domestic (66.1 per cent) and international (33.9 per cent) students. A large majority of respondents

Table 1. What year of your PhD are you currently in (full-time equivalent)?

Year	Percentage
1 st	23.9
2 nd	23.9
3 rd	25.5
4 th	21.1
5+	5.6

were studying full-time. The survey asked 54 questions covering issues such as choices involving candidature, as well as degree structure, research, workload and views of the profession. [Table 1](#) shows that that our sample captured a relatively representative sample of doctoral students when the year of candidature is considered. This is notable, given that candidates' stage of progress may influence their responses to some questions.

Many of those surveyed may have completed an honours or masters degree relatively close to beginning their PhD (with 41.7 per cent aged 21–29), but it appears that a majority began their doctorates after exiting the full-time professional workforce; 46.1 per cent were aged 30–49 and 12.2 per cent were aged above 50. Female students outnumbered males (52.7–47.3 per cent, respectively). This is generally consistent with national figures across all disciplines (Commonwealth of Australia 2012b), but contrasts with the ongoing gender imbalance in the field's academic workforce in Australia and elsewhere (see Maliniak et al. 2008; Sharman and True 2011: 154–56). Finally, more than half of students surveyed did not understand a second language well enough to conduct scholarly research. This is slightly worse than the 49 per cent recorded for Australian IR faculty in the most recent TRIP survey (Maliniak, Peterson, and Tierney 2012: 42). It is an acute problem indicative of the broader decline in language studies across most relevant fields in Australia (see Commonwealth of Australia 2012a: 167–71; McLaren 2011).

Making tough choices: Universities and supervisors

The two most important decisions at the beginning of a PhD are where to study and who to nominate as a supervisor. Conventional wisdom suggests that the most significant factor determining where students choose to study is the reputation of the university. This is reflected in the corporate advertising campaigns that universities use to promote any improvement in their standing in the various international ranking systems (see Marginson and Considine 2000). According to this view, international reputation and research excellence should have been the main reasons why the PhD students surveyed chose their preferred university. The results suggest instead that international reputation and research expertise have limited influence on doctoral candidates. The main reason given for students' choice of university was the relationship with their supervisor, followed by geographic location and the possibility of receiving a scholarship. Indeed, research expertise and the international reputation of the university were considered to be two of the least important factors. Remarkably, this was the case even for international students. Their relationship with a supervisor (24.6 per cent) was the most important factor driving their decision, and international reputation (6.6 per cent) was the least important ([Figure 1](#)).

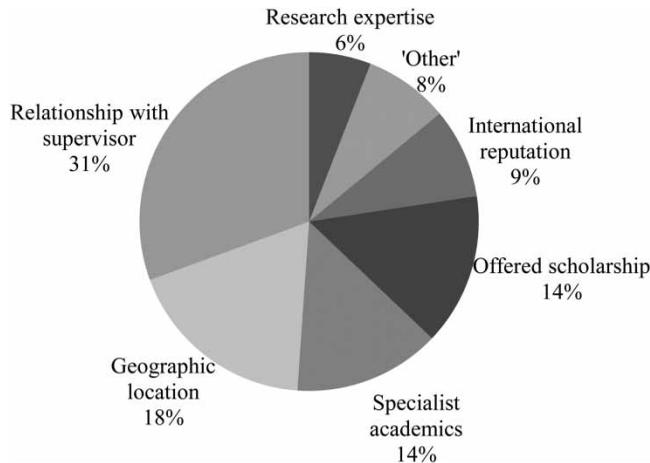


Figure 1. What was the single most important reason for choosing your current university?

When academics cultivate relationships with high-achieving students or those seeking to re-enter academia, it increases the likelihood that those students will remain at their current university, especially since geographic location was also a significant reason to select one university over another. How do prospective PhD students select their primary supervisor? In the survey, 80.5 per cent of students cited the willingness of a supervisor to take them on as the most influential factor guiding their choice, followed closely by 'has intellectual interests that match mine' (74.6 per cent). Less influential were 'is doing interesting research' (40.2 per cent) and 'is a leading academic in the subject matter' (37.3 per cent). The importance of the student–supervisor relationship is further reflected in the finding that once it is established, the majority of students are satisfied with the decisions they have made (see [Figure 2](#)).

Of the students surveyed, 68.1 per cent rated their current supervision arrangements as 'excellent' or 'above average'; 21.2 per cent selected 'average' and 10.7 per cent selected 'below average' or 'poor'. These results reinforce the importance of the supervisor relationship for PhD students. The stature of academics, departments and universities has less bearing on the decisions of IR and politics students

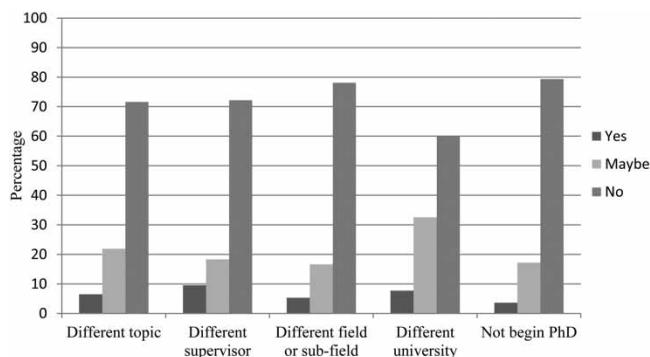


Figure 2. Which decisions would you change?

than is often assumed. Instead, a central theme that emerges from the survey is the need to find an academic who believes in the project from the beginning and is willing to devote the required time.

Degree structure: Room for change?

In Australia, the structure of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has remained relatively unchanged for decades. Students are required to write a thesis of approximately 80,000–100,000 words which makes an original, significant and extensive contribution to knowledge and understanding in the field. The survey results show that a majority of students believe that changes are required to improve the quality of the degree.

For some time, the value, type and extent of methodological training that Australian PhD students require has been debated (Rhodes 2009: 14). Of the students surveyed, 60.4 per cent thought that they had not received enough training, compared to 31.4 per cent who thought that they had and 8.3 per cent who did not know. Furthermore, students were asked: 'In general, how would you characterise your work in epistemological terms?' They defined their research approach as positivist (20.1 per cent), non-positivist (23.7 per cent) and post-positivist (27.8 per cent). These results mirror those of the TRIP survey of Australian scholars (Maliniak, Peterson, and Tierney 2012: 32). Nonetheless, 28.4 per cent of students did not know the kind of epistemology underpinning their research. This applied to candidates beyond the start of their dissertation, including those in their second year (18 per cent), third year (32 per cent) and fourth year or later (22 per cent). These results illustrate the lack of importance that some Australian universities assign to methodological training. This again raises the question of whether there is an urgent need to provide PhD students in politics and IR with a better level of training, not only to improve the quality of their dissertation, but to broaden the appeal of their graduate skill-set.

We also asked whether students were satisfied or dissatisfied with the amount of coursework Australian universities offer. A substantial majority (62.9 per cent) thought that more subjects related to their research area would improve the quality of their doctoral studies, compared to 29.3 per cent who disagreed and 7.8 per cent who were unsure. The survey did not record the types of courses students sought. Apart from methodological courses, PhD programs in the USA typically involve exposure to two or three sub-disciplines. It remains to be seen, however, whether Australian students would be willing to undertake a doctoral program that had such a coursework component. In any case, dissatisfaction about the lack of methodological training and coursework is indicative of dissatisfaction about the structure of doctoral degrees. Changes may need to be made to improve the content of PhD programs.

One final issue related to the program structure is scholarships. The survey found that 65.6 per cent of students had scholarships while 34.4 per cent did not. Scholarships can determine whether candidates complete their PhDs or not. The survey revealed that students without scholarships are 13.8 per cent less confident that they will finish their doctorates. Perhaps more interesting are views on the process of applying for scholarships. Anecdotally, prevailing opinion among students is that the process lacks transparency, is riddled with loopholes and is open to manipulation by supervisors quite predictably seeking to attain scholarships for their students. As [Figure 3](#) shows, there is considerable scepticism about the process.

The responses on the scholarship process are relatively evenly distributed among the three options, but it is important to consider the following. First, 35 per cent of

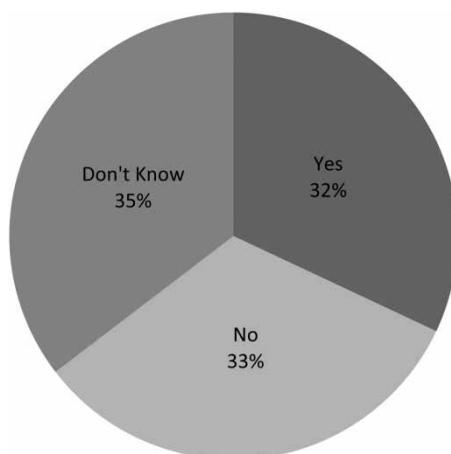


Figure 3. In your experience, are PhD scholarship-application outcomes based solely on merit?

students did not know whether the scholarship outcomes were based on merit. This is a problem in itself, since merit is the central principle according to which universities (and, by extension, the federal government) award scholarships. Second, 61 per cent of students who *have* scholarships thought the process was not based on merit or did not know. In other words, they are sceptical of the process despite being a beneficiary of it. For those who *do not have* scholarships, the figure increased to 82.5 per cent. Third, this scepticism persists in some form across 21 of the 22 universities surveyed, the only exception being a university that had one respondent. These findings underscore the level of confusion about the scholarship-application process and suggest that changes need to be made.

Research interests and approaches

We collected data on PhD research to illuminate its depth and diversity, and to provide a basis for comparison with Australian academics. We distinguished between students who studied politics and those who studied IR. The boundaries between these fields are often blurred, but making this distinction encouraged students to consider their core field. In total 59.4 per cent of students nominated political science as their primary field of study, compared to 40.6 per cent who selected IR.

The survey asked about the methodological framework students used and how they justified their choice. Qualitative analysis was most common, with 62.7 per cent of students using it as their primary method, and 17.8 per cent as a secondary method. Only 8.3 per cent of students used quantitative analysis as their primary method, with 15.4 per cent using it as a secondary method. When asked whether their research was basic (without immediate policy implications) or applied (with specific policy applications in mind), 49.4 per cent of students considered that their research was for the sake of knowledge itself rather than practical application.

The results are diverse in relation to research area. In political science, public policy/administration was the leading sub-field nominated (26.2 per cent), followed by comparative politics/area studies (21.5 per cent). In IR, the research interests of students were consistent with those of academics. As [Figure 4](#) shows, the only

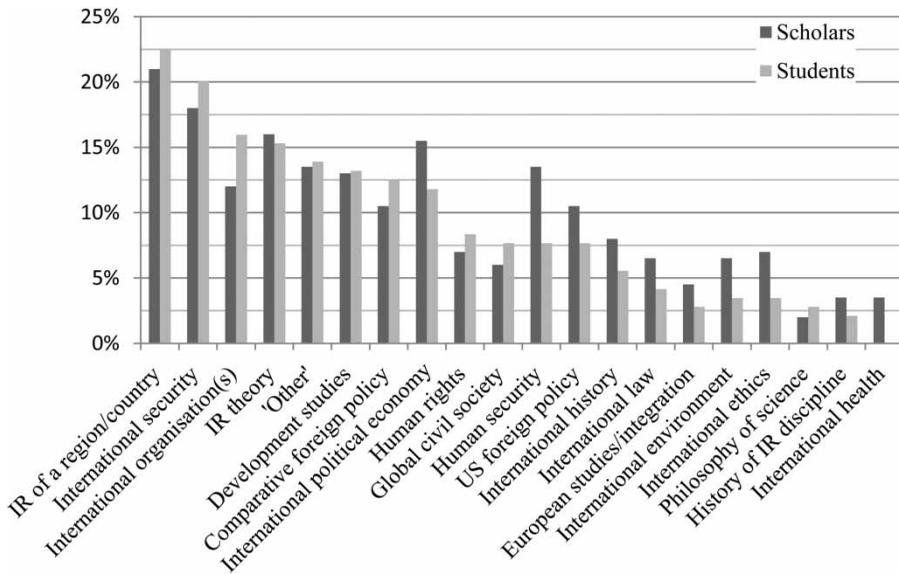


Figure 4. What is your primary and secondary area of research within IR?

Note: Due to a technical error, 'Country × Foreign Policy' was omitted as an option for respondents, which makes the choices different to those offered in the TRIP survey. Source: Maliniak, Peterson, and Tierney (2012: 28–29).

significant differences across 20 areas of research were that no students were researching an international health issue from a politics and IR foundation, and fewer students than academics were interested in human security. Otherwise, students had similar study areas to academics in the field.

There were, however, substantial differences in the realm of foreign policy. The most recent TRIP survey (Maliniak, Peterson, and Tierney 2012: 70) showed that 76 per cent of academics considered East Asia to be the area of greatest strategic importance to Australia, compared to only 37.9 per cent of students according to our survey. Students also expressed different views to academics on the range of foreign-policy issues facing Australia (see Table 2).

Pressures of teaching and publishing

The survey also asked about the range of pressures PhD students currently face. The problem is straightforward for those who want to pursue an academic career.

Table 2. In your opinion what are the three most important foreign-policy issues facing Australia today?

Issue	PhD students (%)	Scholars (%)
Global climate change	61.9	51
Rising power of China	51.7	57
Global debt crisis	25.4	39

Note: For PhD students, results were taken only from those who selected Australia as their country of origin.

Source: Maliniak, Peterson and Tierney (2012: 81).

The field in Australia is increasing its demands of graduates, but the time allocated to satisfy those demands remains constant. Discussions among students suggest that to be competitive for an entry-level position, students need a high-quality dissertation, journal publications, teaching experience and methodological training attained in three or four years. Any attempt to meet one of these demands reduces the time allocated to another. This partly explains why 59.5 per cent of students answered that it would take them three or more years to complete the degree, which is beyond both the duration of a standard scholarship and the optimal submission date imposed by the university. Students estimate that they spend approximately 61 per cent of their time on the dissertation, followed by teaching (16 per cent) and publishing (13 per cent). We discuss each of these pressures in more detail before considering their wider effect.

Doctoral students are expected to gain teaching experience. Of the students surveyed, 62.3 per cent had taught a politics or IR course during their candidature. The 37.7 per cent who had no teaching experience included a large number of international students, many of whom are prevented from teaching due to visa or scholarship restrictions. The time allocated to teaching was significant in the context of the average working week. For initial preparation, 68.9 per cent of students reported spending between 1 and 10 hours, while 31.1 per cent spent more than 10 hours. Regarding contact time in the classroom, 72.8 per cent reported five hours or less, and the remaining 27.2 per cent reported six hours or more. Therefore, many students spend more than a third of their time on teaching duties each week. This raises the question of whether completion times for the degree are realistic.

Furthermore, regarding publishing, there is a gap between what students think is required to attain an academic position and what they can produce. Figure 5 reveals the extent of this problem.

Of the students surveyed, 53.4 per cent predicted that they would have one or two publications near the end of their candidature, while only 1.8 per cent considered this sufficient to meet the field's expectations. One in four students believed that they

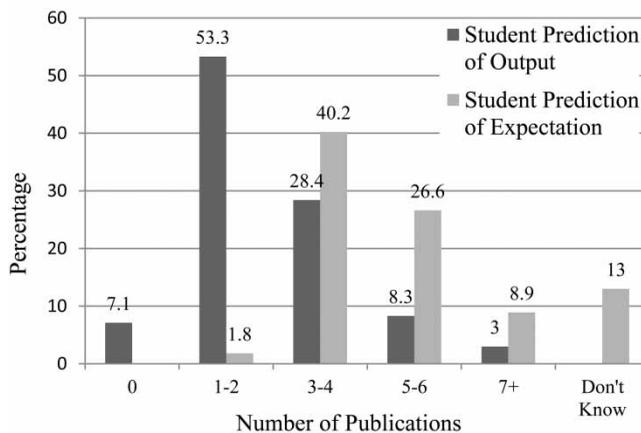


Figure 5. Publications: rumour versus reality

Note: For the question concerning student prediction of expectation, 9.5 per cent of respondents selected 'Does not apply to me'. Hence they have been excluded from this figure.

Table 3. How optimistic are you of achieving a full-time academic position after completing your PhD and within the following time frames?

	Very (%)	Somewhat (%)	Don't know (%)	Not very (%)	Not at all (%)
Less than a year	3.6	12.0	14.4	25.7	24.0
1+ years	7.2	23.4	18.0	22.2	9.0
2+ years	15.0	28.7	21.6	10.2	4.8
5+ years	25.1	22.8	19.8	7.2	5.4

would need five or six publications, that is, more than one for each year of their degree. The two views cannot be reconciled. Moreover, these results say nothing about the quality of publications. Many students are presumably aware of the informal ranking system used in the field, but there is widespread confusion about how these rankings may promote their academic career.

Despite this pressure, most students are committed to pursuing an academic career. Regarding career paths, the top two preferences were for 'academic (research and teaching)' (71 per cent) and 'academic (research)' (54 per cent); the third-most popular choice was 'research in non-profit or government'. Just over 70 per cent of female students expressed a strong interest in pursuing an academic career, with the remaining women citing other employment opportunities and professional disincentives as the reasons for their lack of interest in pursuing a career in academe. A substantial majority (61.7 per cent) of students are willing to move interstate and/or overseas to gain academic employment; 12.6 per cent were unwilling, and 12.6 per cent were unsure. The problem, however, is that students are not confident about achieving full-time academic positions after completing their degrees and in reasonable timeframes (see Table 3). Most believe that it will take about two years to find the type of position they want.

What are the wider implications of these findings? Research expectations have filtered down from academics to students, which calls into question the importance of the dissertation, since it no longer carries the weight it once did for interview panels. It is not uncommon to hear students giving equal weight to building a publishing record and completing the dissertation. Confusion surrounding what is required to secure an academic position and the cynicism this produces may warrant a concerted effort to inform students more fully. Employers should impress on potential candidates that positions are awarded on a case-by-case basis and that all publication records are relative to opportunity as well as the advertised sub-field. Put simply, the field needs to emphasise that since each position is different, so too are the benchmarks.

A role for APSA

APSA, the main organisation promoting political studies in Australia, has a critical role to play for PhD students. As Jaensch (2009: 57) noted in his history of the association, APSA allows students to 'get some runs on the board' by providing them with a platform to introduce their research at the annual conference and establish networks in academia. Our survey revealed, however, that a substantial majority of students are not members of APSA. Postgraduate membership has always been relatively low, but approximately 60 per cent cited lack of awareness about the organisation as the

Table 4. How helpful would the following support be during your PhD candidature and after?

Option	Very helpful (%)	Somewhat helpful (%)	Not helpful (%)
Cross-university, research methodology workshops tailored to the IR and political science field	56.8	34.3	8.9
Professional development workshops or advice to help with publishing, CV and grant-writing, and job applications	54.4	35.5	10.1
Professional blog, Facebook page or linked-in group that you could contribute to	16.6	46.7	36.7
Networking events at conferences	39.6	52.1	8.3
Website for IR and/or political science in Australia with information about events, grants, jobs	63.9	30.2	5.9
Mentoring program tailored to IR and/or political science involving academics across universities	55.0	37.3	7.7

reason for not joining the association, compared to only 10 per cent who cited excessive cost. Therefore, there is a real opportunity for APSA to reach out and promote stronger links between PhD students and the profession. The survey showed that students seek a wider provision of services from APSA.

There is widespread concern among students that they lack some of the skills necessary to gain employment. Of those surveyed, just over half believed that job applicants who complete PhDs in the USA or the UK generally have an advantage over applicants who complete their doctorates in Australia. The remaining 19.5 per cent disagreed, and 26 per cent were unsure. One possible explanation is that Australian PhD students lack a level of methodology training similar to their overseas counterparts. This is a rational concern, given that such expertise may be the only attribute distinguishing international applicants from their domestic counterparts. It is unclear whether interview panels would favour such training, but this is a reasonable assumption to make, given that the field in Australia remains tied to the British tradition of IR and political studies (see Devetak 2009; Rhodes 2009). The survey clarified the kinds of assistance PhD students desired (see Table 4).

Students nominated a website for politics and IR in Australia, as well as research methodology workshops, as the most helpful forms of support. APSA could help to coordinate, fund and promote a number of workshops around the country. This would not overcome the perceived problem of students lacking international competitiveness, but it may well improve their situation. Broader discussion is needed on the nature of any methodology training implemented on a national scale. Since the field in Australia is not heavily oriented towards the positivist, quantitative approach of the USA, it may not be appropriate to follow the American approach to methodology training too closely.

Conclusion

This article has, for the first time, reported the views of Australian PhD students in politics and IR as a distinct group. We have shown that the key motivating factor for students choosing a university was the relationship with their potential supervisor.

In addition, many students believed that the current structure of the doctoral degree is outdated. They were, however, open to undertaking a component of coursework related to their research and, in particular, methodology training. The survey revealed a gulf between the publications students predicted they could accomplish and what they believed the field expects of them. It also showed that students were pessimistic about attaining academic positions due to their inability to meet these perceived expectations. Finally, a majority of students were unaware of APSA. Students would prefer the association to take a more active role, especially through the organisation of methodology workshops. Notwithstanding the association's limited capacity due to small staffing numbers, there is substantial opportunity for APSA to be more actively engaged with PhD students in the future.

More broadly, this article has raised important questions for politics and PhD studies in Australia. The current model of the doctoral degree is the underlying problem. For those students seeking to enter academia, the additional (albeit informal) expectation that they gain teaching experience and a strong publishing record is occupying time that is not provided for under the current system. In recent years, many candidates have graduated and secured positions in academia, but the demands and pressures on PhD students are perceived to be increasing. There is an opportunity, therefore, for universities to advocate extending the length of candidature in the doctoral degree and the scholarships that underpin it. Students would then be able to accommodate a component of coursework, methodology training and publication, all of which would improve their competitiveness in the global job market. Established scholars should give doctoral students a clearer understanding about what is required to gain an academic position in Australia. The long-term impact of the mystery surrounding the academic job market, apart from the widespread pessimism it fosters, will be to discourage doctoral students from seeking to enter academia. More informed conversation is needed not only between students and scholars, but within each of these groups.

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