

PUNCHING OUR WEIGHT: *the humanities and social sciences in public policy making*

In September 2008 the British Academy published the latest in its series of reports which seek to inform public debate on topics of current interest. The report, *Punching our Weight: the humanities and social sciences in public policy making*, addresses the question of how policy makers can maximise the untapped potential of research produced within the humanities and social science disciplines.

The launch of the report brought together public policy makers, Fellows of the British Academy and other leading researchers, the Chief Executives of the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council, and representatives from research organisations and think tanks. Attending the launch, the then Minister for Science and Innovation, Ian Pearson, said:

The humanities and social sciences are an integral part of our vision and have much to contribute to the debate on the great issues that affect us all.

The Government is absolutely committed to ensuring academic research continues to play an integral part in forming public policy. Therefore I welcome the publication of this report and its focus on increasing the contribution of humanities and social science research.

We will consider its recommendations alongside those of the Council for Science and Technology, which my colleague, John Denham, has asked to look more broadly at ways of improving engagement. The report is also a timely contribution to our continuing public consultation on developing a new Science and Society strategy for the UK.

The report, compiled by an expert working party chaired by Professor Sir Alan Wilson FBA, is informed by extensive soundings from both policy makers and academics. It finds both sides in agreement that a greater contribution from the humanities and social sciences is needed, especially as the



Figure 1: Sir Alan Wilson, FBA and Ian Pearson, Minister for Science and Innovation, at the launch of *Punching our Weight* on 17 September 2008.

challenges faced by society – globalisation, climate change, social mobility, cultural understanding, happiness and quality of life – are growing in complexity and require the development of a more sophisticated understanding of human behaviour.

The report makes 20 recommendations designed to improve dialogue, innovation and knowledge transfer between leading academics and policy makers in Westminster, Whitehall, the devolved administrations and other public bodies.

They include: reducing the high proportion of government research budgets allocated, contrary to the Government's own guidelines, to short-term projects; strengthening government departments' peer-review mechanisms to ensure they commission the highest quality research; and improving training for PhD students to meet the future needs of policy makers.

The report also recommends that universities take more account of public policy engagement in their criteria for academic promotion; and that government departments

set and publish targets to increase two-way secondments with universities and research organisations.

The British Academy will be holding a series of meetings in 2009 to facilitate further discussion between policy makers and the academic community. Further information, the full report, and the British Academy's response to the DIUS consultation 'A Vision for Science and Society' can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/reports/

