

Reference for Dr Roberto Stefan Foa



Academic Career Pathways

Referee details	
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Name	Professor Michael Kenny
Email	mhk30@cam.ac.uk
Phone	
Position	Professor of Politics and Public Policy and Inaugural Director, Bennett Institute for Public Policy
Organisation	University of Cambridge

Michael Kenny

Professor of Public Policy,
Director, Bennett Institute
Cambridge University
UK

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Reference letter for Dr Roberto Foa's application for Promotion to the position of Associate Professor (Grade 10)

Dr Roberto Foa was appointed to a UTO position in POLIS and the Bennett Institute in 2019. In that period he has made a major contribution to the public policy teaching programme, has completed a body of high-quality, impactful research, and developed a strong record of delivering high-quality teaching.

Staff appointed to positions in public policy are primarily required to make their teaching contribution through the M.Phil in Public Policy, a prestigious and well established programme that has been running for over a decade. While there is some additional public policy teaching now happening at the Undergraduate level in the Department, this means that there is an unavoidable imbalance between the teaching profile and associated contribution of UTOs in this academic sub-field compared to those of most other UTOs in the Department who are required to teach across a range of Undergraduate modules. Roberto's main teaching contributions have been at the M.Phil level but he has also contributed Undergraduate teaching on the POL 5 and POL 22 courses.

Equally, it should be noted that UTOs working in this research area, just like their counterparts in policy schools in other leading global Universities, often dedicate more time to public service, governmental impact and advisory roles than do their counterparts in other areas of the discipline. These endeavours make significant contributions to the profile and impact of the research profile of the Department or Institute in which they work, and are typically emphasised alongside the conventional metrics of research productivity (peer-reviewed articles, books etc).

Roberto joined POLIS in 2019, having previously been a Lecturer with the public policy programme at the University of Melbourne, and having had a longer prior career at two of the most important global policy organisations - the United Nations and the World Bank. Since arriving, he has made a significant contribution to the delivery of public policy education, administration and research at the University of Cambridge.

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In terms of his teaching contribution, his initial responsibility on the MPP programme was to take on the teaching of the Public Policy Statistics module. This is a notoriously challenging berth, given that a significant proportion of the students taking this programme have no statistical background, while a minority of them are very fluent in this area. Roberto led a major overhaul of the content of this module, drawing upon his extensive experience in providing statistical analysis to policymakers at the World Bank and United Nations. It now provides a much clearer and more coherent overview, with the needs of future policymakers in mind, and gives emphasis to the critical interpretation and applied use of statistical data. He has also arranged for a TA to provide on-going in-depth support and coaching for students for whom this is a particularly challenging area.

This revamped module elicited a positive response from the students, and is all the more impressive in that he has only eight two-hour sessions with them. Based on my knowledge of other public policy schools, I would report that it is very unusual for a Statistics course to be as positively evaluated as his has been. His work in this area has made a very positive contribution to the reputation and profile of our programme, which is being delivered in an increasingly competitive international environment.

Roberto has also made important contributions to other aspects of the MPP teaching programme. He has been a very effective co-ordinator and leader of the Policy Case studies module which runs for two semesters throughout each academic year, drawing up and managing presentations by multiple external speakers. He has also delivered well received teaching sessions on the Politics and Policy and Science, Evidence and Policymaking modules. And for this academic year (2023-24) he has taken over the role of co-ordinator of the latter module.

He has also made a valuable contribution to M.Phil teaching in POLIS beyond the scope of the MPP, delivering a well received course on States and State formation for the M.Phil in Politics and International Studies.

His teaching evaluations have generally been of a very high standard, particularly his Statistics module, and I know from talking to successive cohorts of students how highly he is regarded as a teacher. In addition, he has supervised a large number of students on the MPP, many of who have achieved high standards of academic excellence and pursued high-level careers in the worlds of government and policy. For several years he has also offered students an Easter work placement with the Centre for the Future of Democracy (which was for some while based at the Bennett Institute).

He has also taken on a number of key Committee roles in the area of public policy. He served as coordinator of MPP work placements – one of the most important selling points for the programme -- from 2020-22, as well as being chair of the exam board, and has served as a member of the Admissions Committee for the programme. And, for POLIS he has been an active member of a

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number of education-focused Committees, including Degree Committee, Postgraduate Education Committee, and the Ethics, Risk and Fieldwork Committees.

In October 2023, he took up the role of Director of the MPP Programme – a major service role within the Department which carries significant levels of responsibility. He has performed impressively in this role, chairing and drawing up the agendas for team meetings throughout the term, overseeing the work of the relevant Department administrator, representing the programme on various key Department Committees, and engaging constructively and patiently with the student representatives whom he meets on a regular basis. In this role he has also shown himself to be able and willing to look ahead to spot potential issues and to think in a strategic and longer term vein about the future development of the programme.

Roberto has also made significant and valued contributions to the work of the Bennett Institute since his appointment. This is a successful, cross-disciplinary and high-profile research policy and engagement centre, based within POLIS, for which I have been the inaugural Director since 2018. He was in particular involved in developing and leading the Centre for the Future of Democracy, a Centre based within the Institute, working with Professor David Runciman, and his efforts ensured that it quickly gained a considerable profile.

Roberto's primary intellectual contribution to this endeavour came via prestigious research awards he secured from the UK Government's Cabinet Office, and the publication of a succession of high-level reports on shifts in global opinion on a series of major political and social issues, including attitudes towards democracy in different parts of the world, which they supported. These were the fruits of an international research team that he has been instrumental in establishing and co-ordinating. These papers were published as reports from the Bennett Institute and received coverage in the UK and international media, as well as sparking considerable academic interest and debate among scholars working in the fields of international politics and democracy studies. These have been among the most impactful outputs that we have launched at the Institute. The reports produced by his team accounted for 21% of all web traffic to the homepage of the Bennett Institute for Public Policy in 2021-22. Latterly, in recognition of the quality and influence of this work, Roberto was elected to the Committee that oversees the prestigious World Values Survey. This is the world's longest-running scientific and academic study of social, political, and cultural values across the globe.

In terms of his academic scholarship, Roberto's research agenda is focused primarily on exploring questions about the status and health of democracy, world-wide, and citizen perceptions of the quality of government. He has become a particular expert in the field of political methodology and is well known for his comparative survey work, and the way in which he ingrates novel data from search or social media with classical survey-based approaches. He has now amassed a publication record which is impressive for someone at this career stage. And many of his pieces have achieved an unusually high citation count. With great consistency he has produced a steady stream of high-quality

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research published in leading journals. A number of these engaged in high-profile debates about the health and future of democracy across the world. Since coming to Cambridge, he has continued to publish in leading journals (either as single author or with different collaborators), including publications in some of the leading international outlets, including *World Development*, *Frontiers in Political Science*, *Political Geography*, *PLoS One*, *Journal of Democracy*, and *Policy Studies*. In addition to the series of publications he had under his belt before arriving here, this is an impressive set of scholarly outputs by any measure.

Most recently, he and his research collaborators have been awarded a contract by Princeton University Press, one of the most prestigious political science publishers in the world – a reflection of the high standing which his academic scholarship has now achieved. And he is regularly invited to be a speaker at academic gatherings internationally and by prestigious policy organisations (both national and international) – good measures of his international research profile.

More generally, Roberto has been very successful in the course of his academic career at piloting research and engagement projects with senior public policy stakeholders. He worked with the UK Cabinet Office as an official adviser from 2021 to 2023, advising on policies relating to democratic resilience in Eastern Europe, providing important insights garnered from surveys on democratic values in Ukraine, and advising on government communications strategies in the context of the rising threat of disinformation. And he has more recently been involved in advising both the Foreign Office and MOD, providing analytics on Russian public opinion using various computational methods. These are unusually impactful instances of policy engagement, which have resulted in the direct transfer of expert knowledge and insight that he and his team of researchers have compiled into the thinking of some of the key Departments in British government.

More generally, I would draw attention to Roberto's collegiality and readiness to go the extra mile in helping students and junior researchers. He has included post-graduate students as co-authors on shared publications, and provided some of our MPP students the opportunity to gain valuable CV entries as they approach the job market by giving them the chance to contribute to projects in which he is involved (including as co-authors). Several of the postdoctoral researchers with whom he has worked closely have gained competitive tenure-track jobs, and he has been generous in providing them with support in relation to the requirements of the academic job market.

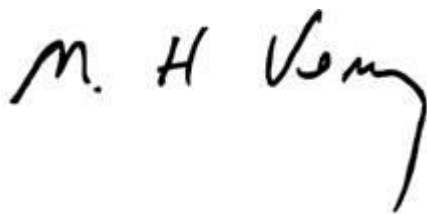
Joining the public policy community which is housed at the Bennett Institute just a year after our launch, Roberto has made a big contribution to our success, and his work has undoubtedly helped shape our reputation for analytically informed, methodologically rigorous and impactful research. He is a widely-recognised scholar in a field of considerable contemporary interest and has established himself as a well-known, respected researcher with an international reputation. He is in my judgement performing well against the criteria set out for promotion to Associate Professor (Grade 10) at the University of Cambridge.

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Department of Politics and International Studies

Alison Richard Building
7 West Road
Cambridge, CB3 9DT

Yours sincerely,



Professor Michael Kenny

Professor of Public Policy | Director of the Bennett Institute

University of Cambridge, UK

Tel: +44 (0)1223 761737

Email: mhk30@cam.ac.uk

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Department of Politics and International Studies

Alison Richard Building
7 West Road
Cambridge, CB3 9DT