

Shaping the Discipline: The Impact of QAA Benchmark Statements on Politics and International Relations

Abstract

The question ‘What is Politics and International Relations?’ often goes unasked, potentially leading to varied interpretations across universities. The review of the Quality Assurance Agency’s (QAA) Subject Benchmark Statement for Politics and International Relations in early 2022 provided a key moment to define the discipline. For over three decades, benchmark statements have been crucial in UK higher education, guiding learning assurance and disciplinary self-definition. Despite their significance, the development process and impact of these benchmarks at a disciplinary level are underexplored. This article explores the history, development, and influence of benchmark statements on Politics and International Relations, illustrating how they balance commonalities and differences across UK institutions. It addresses concerns about the potential restrictiveness of these benchmarks and emphasizes their voluntary nature. Through insights from members of the Subject Benchmark Statement advisory group, the article aims to provide a thorough understanding of how benchmark statements shape and reflect the evolving landscape of the teaching of Politics and International Relations.

Keywords Politics, International Relations, Subject Benchmark Statement, Disciplinary Standards, Quality Assurance Agency

Introduction

Opportunities to discuss and shape our discipline rarely come along. For many of us, ‘What is Politics and International Relations (IR)?’ is a question which is so basic, we almost never ask it. This is despite the fact that we often think about it. For many Politics and IR scholars, the natural response is that we know the answer, or at least we think we do, but in reality the contours of our discipline often differ from person to person, university to university. What is a norm in one university may not even be an option in another. So how do we ensure consistency across our field of teaching? How can we ensure that there is something which can be labelled accurately as a degree in

Politics, a degree in IR, or a degree in Politics and IR, and that there is a commonly accepted meaning of what that means?

In early 2022, one opportunity to think about the landscape of Politics and IR presented itself in the shape of the review of the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) Subject Benchmark Statement (SBS) for Politics and IR. Benchmark statements such as Politics and IR have become a commonplace point of reference in discussions regarding the assurance of the quality of learning in UK higher education over the last three decades, providing an important reference point for how a discipline sees itself and an external statement about the value of studying in the disciplinary field of reference (Smith and Sperry, 2024). Subject Benchmark Statements emerged out of recommendation 25 of the National Committee of Inquiry of Higher Education (NCIHE, 1997) – otherwise known as the Dearing Report. Each SBS is voluntarily written by groups of experts from the respective disciplines, who work together to identify the key elements of their field of study as well as responding to the evolving environment of higher education. At its core, a SBS provides the context of what a degree should be composed of. But the statement also needs to reflect both the commonalities across UK Higher Education as well as the differences between institutions, incorporating the traditional and the cutting edge.

Although the emergence and subsequent evolution of benchmark statements have been detailed in a number of studies which have focused on matters such as assessment (Yorke, 2002), student outcomes (Quinlan, 2014) as well as at a disciplinary level (Breakey, 2012), very little has actually been written about the process and mechanics of writing a benchmark statement and the way in which they impact on the shaping of a discipline. A notable exception is the reflection that Chris Ashford provides of his account of chairing the Law SBS that was published in 2023 (Ashford, 2024). This is despite the fact that the role of QAA benchmark statements have evolved considerably since they were first introduced in 2000. Each iteration is different, demonstrating the changes within universities and the wider world. In this sense, each SBS has reflected a timeline that takes into consideration the evolution of pedagogic trends and the emergence of new issues. As a result, each SBS evolves as new methods of study emerge and new issues are required to be focused on, along with the needs and requirements of our students and other interested groups such as employers. This has, however, led to some concerns that the very presence of a SBS places too many restrictions at a disciplinary level, a point which led to the QAA Chief Executive Vicky Stott responding to such criticism by emphasising the point that they are not mandatory (Stott, 2022).

The aim of this article is to contribute to the understanding of the role of QAA benchmark statements through a case study of the process by which the Politics and IR

SBS was reviewed in 2022. This review took place as part of the normal SBS cyclical review process undertaken by the QAA, which in 2022 included some 13 subject areas that ranged from Anthropology to Psychology. The article begins with a review of the evolution of benchmark statements, identifying some of the key themes and tensions surrounding their emergence and subsequent development over the last three decades. The article then proceeds to set out the context of the work that was undertaken in the 2022 review, including the way in which the group was formed. The article proceeds to discuss the different issues the group had to consider and the process of writing a long statement covering multiple elements. It also casts an eye to the future by offering some advice for those who may re-write the SBS in time, allowing them to build on our work and perhaps give more time and thought to some of the bigger issues we were unable to tackle.

Section 1: Why QAA Subject Benchmark Statements?

While other academic disciplines such as Law (Bager-Elsborg, 2017), have over a number of decades sought to define their areas of specialism, those within the field of Politics and IR have historically tended not to formally do this. This is partly a reflection of the formal emergence and organisation of the study of Politics and IR within the UK being a relatively more recent development. Although Politics had been studied in the UK since the late nineteenth century, the real growth in the study of Politics and IR took place after the Second World War. This was reflected in the emergence of notable Politics departments at the Universities of Manchester and Liverpool, who respectively appointed Bill Mackenzie and Wilfrid Harrison to professorships in Politics in 1949. And whilst they had a significant impact in shaping the study of Politics through the 1950s and 1960s, their legacy continues to this day through annual prizes in their name that are awarded by the UK Political Studies Association (PSA) that was founded in 1950. The early post-war years were dominated more by the study of Politics than IR, with the formal establishment of the British International Studies Association (BISA) only happening in 1975.

As a discipline, or disciplines, the study of Politics and IR has not been shaped by Professional or Statutory Regulatory Bodies (PSRB's). This differs from the study of subjects such as Accountancy, Biology, Geography, and Psychology. A direct impact of this has been that the study of Politics and IR has not had to adhere to a specific 'menu' of modules or content as some academic subjects must. The UK's largest Politics and IR professional groups, the PSA and BISA, did not attempt to define the academic field of study, although their equivalents in some other nations did, such as the American Political Science Association (APSA). The defining of an academic specialism can often be exclusionary and lead to furious disagreements, all of which was avoided by having a more flexible (and largely inclusive) view of the discipline. In the UK, where there was

discussion of the discipline this tended to come in two primary forms. Firstly, discussion was centred around the teaching of the academic subjects. What needed to be taught, what was more optional, what was essential - these were all questions which were wrestled with within UK universities, and different decisions were often reached in different institutions, although there were often commonalities. For example, while there emerged specialisms in some universities, such as methodology at the University of Essex and political economy at the University of Sheffield, core areas of focus such as the study of British Politics and Comparative Politics were common across most Politics departments (Goldsmith and Grant, 2007; Craig, 2020: 156-7). The second area of debate was within the academic literature, where different academics argued for their own particular version of Politics (or as it is often referred to Political Science) and IR. This included the likes of Jean Blondel who at the University of Essex emphasised the importance of collaboration (Budge, 2006).

Such contextual points are important in understanding the background to the role of an SBS from the perspective of Politics and IR. The concept of the SBS emerged from the work of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education appointed by the British Government in 1996 with a wide remit including the size, shape, purpose, funding and structure of the sector. The report of the committee, often referred to as the Dearing report, after its chair, Sir Ron Dearing, collected evidence through oral hearings, consultation events, a consultation questionnaire, through the commissioning of a number of research studies (NCIHE, 1997).

The committee concluded that there were concerns relating to the adequacy of existing arrangements for ensuring quality and standards in higher education, the comparability of degrees awarded by different institutions, and the extent to which there was transparent public information on the content of courses and the standard that had been reached by those receiving awards. As the National Curriculum had brought standardisation to UK schools a decade earlier, the expectation was that there should be some degree of standardisation across higher education, while retaining the subject specific flexibility which higher education demands. The solution it proposed, when it reported in 1997, had a number of key elements. Firstly, a qualification framework should be established which would provide a national standard for the level of achievement for each level of higher education award. This would ensure that the degree qualifications had equivalence across the sector and guaranteed the value of, for example, a BA (Hons) degree. Secondly, for each subject, there would be 'benchmark information' which would identify 'threshold' levels of achievement that students would be expected to reach in their course to achieve an award. These subject benchmarks could be used by institutions in their own processes of developing and approving degrees and could also be used by external examiners in their assurance of

degree standards. It was with regard to the external examiner system that the committee made its third key recommendation in this area, proposing that a national system of external examining be introduced, with a body of trained and approved experts undertaking this work. Interpretations would differ. Some critics thought that what was proposed was a system of central standards with a mechanism for their enforcement (Trow, 1998). Supporters suggested that this quality assurance would ensure standardisation and the professionalism of the sector, as well as making it less open to criticism.

The task of putting these recommendations into practice was given to a new organisation the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which moved forward with the work of consulting the higher education sector on how the new system should operate. This included establishing three pilot subject benchmark groups in 1997 which covered the disciplines of Chemistry, History and Law so as to gain an insight in the operation of benchmark groups. The three groups were chosen because they reflected 'the differing traditions and cultures of individual academic disciplines' (QAA, 1998: 1). The QAA gave each of the pilot groups freedom to decide on the nature and process of their work, with the QAA's subsequent evaluation noting that feedback from group members indicated that 'the Benchmarking process and its outcomes represent an advance on the current practice in the articulation and judgement of standards within subjects (QAA 1998, para 6). As a result, a further nineteen subject benchmark groups were established which included Politics and IR in 2000.

Buckler (2002) reviewed the experience of those putting together the first Politics and IR SBS. Although the QAA had worked with the PSA and BISA to create the Advisory Group and, as Buckler (2002: 52) notes, accepted their nominations "without reservation", there were mixed views about the whole process. Many in the wider politics subject community were suspicious that this was an attempt to impose a 'national curriculum' on the university sector. More generally, there were fears that the degree of autonomy that universities had enjoyed within a publicly funded system was being steadily eroded. Concerns such as these had been flagged in the QAA's evaluation of the pilot subject benchmark groups (QAA, 1998, para 8.1), while the evaluation undertaken by Mantz Yorke of the first 22 benchmark statements emphasised that it would be difficult and 'counter-productive' to achieve a 'high degree of precision in specification' in any benchmark statement (Yorke, 2001: 1).

Among those on the Politics and IR SBS group, Buckler (2002: 56) found two broad approaches. Firstly, there were those who saw the benchmarking process as a risk to the discipline which needed to be mitigated, and their role on the group as one of damage limitation. Secondly, there was another view that the process was a positive

opportunity for 'demarcate clearly the subject area and celebrate its potential'. Similar tensions were evident in the SBS for other cognate disciplines, such as Sociology (Chandler 2001: 47) and played out across the range of subjects involved in the benchmarking process. As Greatrix (2005: 204) notes, while some might have seen academic involvement in the process as caving in to external pressure, "perhaps a more likely explanation is that the benchmarking process was effectively subverted by the benchmarking groups which meant that the final statements were at such a level of generality they were difficult to object to". Indeed as Buckler (2002: 55) notes, the Politics SBS Advisory Group agreed to draft the statement at a reasonably "high level of abstraction". Yet, Greatrix also cautioned that "what might seem like a victory for the QAA's opponents... the achievement of the Agency in managing to co-opt a wide range of academics.. should not be underestimated" (2005: 204). Regardless of the viewpoints, subject benchmarks were here to stay and were broadly embraced by subject communities who viewed them less of a cumbersome regulatory imposition and more as a framing of the discipline that was undertaken by experienced colleagues.

Politics and IR were among the first batch of 22 Subject Benchmark Statements published by the QAA in March 2000, with a further batch of 25 benchmarks following the next year (Brown 2004: 125-6). Reading the first version of the SBS for Politics and IR that was published in 2000, it is probably fair to say that both the 'cynics' and the 'optimists' made an impact on the final draft which both set out a clear statement of the main areas of the taught discipline, while also quite explicitly stating that there was no intention to 'lay out a 'National Curriculum' for Politics and International Relations' (QAA, 2000: 3). Yet even by this time the emphasis of higher education quality policy had begun to shift. As Brown (2004) notes "during the consultation process, the proposal for the central registration of external examiners had been dropped and by 2001 the QAA was articulating the SBS as representing "'reference points' as opposed to outcomes". Nevertheless, a level of ambiguity remained. For example, while QAA (2002: 12) academic audit methodology stated that benchmarks "remain no more than statements of what relevant academic communities consider to be valid frames of reference", it also stated that they were "authoritative reference points, which student and other interested parties will expect both to be taken into account when programmes are design and reviewed". Indeed, it was even suggested that if there was a 'tick box' culture or compliance approach to subject benchmarks, that the fault often lay with the way that higher education institutions treated them (Bellingham 2008). In many ways what mattered more than the official policy, was how practitioners used benchmarks in practice. While there is little firm evidence that can be drawn upon to illuminate this, the recollections of the authors is that the academic community of politics scholars took a balanced and proportionate approach to the use of the benchmark statement in their roles as course leaders, external examiners and external subject expert of validation

and review panels. As each SBS reflected the discipline, they also shaped it, creating a feedback loop where the discipline and the statement worked in conjunction with each other, neither needing explicitly to refer to the other in all but official instances due to the shared ground between them.

However, the changes in UK higher education, and the views of the different governments, changed the SBS landscape. The introduction of undergraduate student fees in 1998 with an initial £1,000 fee cap and the subsequent increase to £3,000 in 2006 and £9,000 in 2012 changed the relationship of students to their institutions, making them 'customers' in a competitive market place (Brown and Carasso, 2013). The changing needs of business and industry also impacted on student life and the SBS, meaning that professional literacy or 'employability' became more visible within all disciplines. Students need to be able to articulate their own skills in a language which employers understand, something which is still a work in progress, and the SBS were one way in which this could be encouraged across the sector. Government's wanted students to have a greater voice in university life, and they wanted a greater voice themselves in some instances, meaning the SBS became more politically sensitive and took on a greater regulatory position. The status of SBS in England began to change noticeably in 2015, with a shift towards more 'risk-based' regulation, focused on student outcomes. There were a number of aspects to this including a reduction in the scope of the Quality Code, with Subject Benchmarks falling outside the definition of 'core practices'. In 2017, a new regulatory body, the Office for Students (OfS), introduced a different approach to regulating quality and standards described as 'risk based', 'principles based' and 'outcomes focused'. Following a consultation in 2022, the Quality Code was no longer part of the regulatory infrastructure, and in 2023 the QAA stepped aside from all regulatory activity in England, while remaining as an independent body working with higher education institutions to enhance the quality of higher education. A direct implication of this is that while an SBS is a reference point across the UK as a whole, there is not a specific regulatory requirement that they are applicable to Higher Education providers in England.

Section 2: The 2022 Project

As with the majority of SBS groups, for the 2022 review, we were able to look back at the way in which the Politics and IR SBS had evolved since the first statement was introduced in 2000, having being chaired by Professor Elizabeth Meehan, with 18 academic members of the Advisory Group. Subsequent revisions were chaired by Dr Jacqui Briggs in 2007 (3 academic group members), Dr Jacqui Briggs in 2015 (12 academic group members, 1 student, and 1 employer) and Dr Lisa Harrison in 2019 (1 academic and 1 QAA group member) (QAA, 2000, 2007, 2015, 2019). The work that

we undertook in 2022 was therefore the fifth revision to the Politics and IR SBS, although some of the previous revisions had been relatively limited in terms of the changes that were made as reflected in the nature of their membership. This particularly applied to the 2007 and 2019 SBS updates. We were also able to draw upon several other SBS statements involved in this round of review for other subject areas, which served as a guide for how we considered revisions to Politics and IR.

The background to the 2022 project was that in September 2021 the QAA invited expressions of interest for the role of Chair and Deputy Chair of forthcoming SBS reviews, which included Politics and IR. This led to the appointment of Professor John Craig from Leeds Beckett University as Advisory Group Chair and Dr Ross Bellaby from the University of Sheffield as Deputy Chair. At the time, Craig was the PSA lead trustee for Teaching and Learning and co-chair of the PSA Teaching and Learning Network while Bellaby was Executive Committee lead for Teaching and Learning at BISA. In October 2021 the QAA published a call for expressions of interest to serve on the Politics and IR SBS Advisory Group (QAA, 2021) and as Chair and Deputy Chair, Craig and Bellaby reviewed the applications received for group membership. This process included both an evaluation of the merit of each application and consideration relating to the balance and diversity of the Advisory Group, to ensure that it represented the diversity of the sector (table 1). While obviously gender and ethnicity were key concerns, there were other considerations which went into the make-up of the SBS Advisory Group. Academics were required from a variety of different institutions to ensure that the breadth of the UK higher education sector was represented. It was also key to consider the specialisms of those potentially involved to ensure that the statement was as inclusive as possible and accurately represented the different strands of the discipline. Application to serve on the Advisory Group, which was on a voluntary and non-remunerated basis, was open not only to academics, but also to students, employers, and representatives of any relevant professional or statutory bodies.

Table 1 (to be inserted here)

While for vocational subjects it is important to have representation on SBS Advisory Groups from employers and PSRBs, this was less of a pressing issue Politics and IR. Within our schools and departments, many of our students do not gain employment as MPs or Politicians, the traditional assumption made about those who study politics. Instead, our students skills are highly valued in many sectors and industries and therefore it would not have been possible for all of those, or even for a majority of those, to be represented within the subject benchmark group. However, Craig and Bellaby concluded that it would be useful to have a member of the Advisory Group who had gained a degree in the discipline and worked within the wider sector (rather than just

recruiting academics who may hold an undergraduate degree within the discipline). They therefore approached a member of YouGov, the online research data and analytics technology group and a member of their team joined the SBS Advisory Group. Two students studying for Politics and IR undergraduate degrees were also asked to join the group.

While starting with the last Politics and IR benchmark statement that was published in 2019 made logistical sense, and was certainly helpful in organising our thought processes and priorities, it could be argued that this practical step unintentionally limited our thinking. By starting with the last statement, we did not consider some of the larger issues in the statement, which would perhaps have been interesting although inevitably time consuming and potentially unhelpful to the process. Perhaps the largest issue which we did not consider was the very basic starting point of the project - what is Politics? What is International Relations? What is Politics and International Relations? Such a debate, rehearsed by many noted academics in print (Gamble, 2019), can be enlightening, but is also likely to focus on issues unrelated to the teaching of that subject. Sometimes a common understanding, which is not focused on the minutiae of the debate, can be enough and that was certainly our experience. While members of the advisory group may have had different views on where the boundaries between politics and international relations lie, our views and lived experiences of higher education were close enough for us to consider the teaching of the subjects without trying to unpick the stitching of our discipline.

Due to the wide range of members necessary for the creation of the SBS, size quickly became an issue. While diverse voices were hugely important for the creation of the SBS as a whole, there was a recognition that writing the statement with such a large team would be extremely difficult. The Advisory Group Chair and Deputy Chair therefore suggested that the work would be divided into five working groups which included the three new sub-sections of the SBS, namely: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion; Sustainability, and Entrepreneurship and Enterprise Education. The fourth working groups would focus on Content, Structure and Delivery and the fifth on Benchmark standards. All members were asked to indicate whether they wish to lead a sub-group and what particular elements of the statement they were interested in. The choices given were focused around the new sub-sections of the statement, some of which reflected the content of previous statements and some which were included as a new requirement from QAA. There was a recognition that while some areas of work were more technical, such as on benchmark standards as they related to threshold and typical attainment standards, the section on content, structure and delivery was probably the biggest area of work as it included issues relating to the curriculum, course structures, teaching and assessment.

The different writing groups worked in different ways, with member often being a member of more than one group. Sub-group leads took responsibility for organising meetings of their group, where as with the Advisory Group as a whole there was a recognition that colleagues often had multiple commitments and pressures on their time. The dynamics of the group often meant that sections were written and amended several times to ensure that all members were happy with the clarity of the statement, as well as leading everyone to agreement on the underlying purpose of each section and the approach being taken to it. Once these statements had been produced, and each group was happy with their input, the sections were distributed amongst the wider group where discussion was encouraged. This ensured that all members were aware of the discussions informing the writing process and that everyone had access to each individual section before these were pulled together by the Chair and Deputy Chair.

Section 3: The Process

Starting from a common position of understanding the landscape of our discipline, we began our discussion by comparing our experiences in higher education. What had surprised us? What had we found the most interesting, the most challenging? Which specialisms did we have and which were evident in our universities? Given that within the UK there are different groups of universities, different norms, different specialisms available in some places and not others, these experiences allowed us to come to the group discussions with a wider frame of knowledge, allowing us to build a statement which was more inclusive and more comprehensive than it would otherwise have been. This was hugely helpful as the statement needs to be inclusive while still representing our disciplinary norms. To create a more reductive statement would have put university programmes and departments at risk and would have created division within the field. Once we had that shared knowledge, however brief our discussions might have been, we were able to understand each other more effectively, a key part of any group dynamic.

For the QAA, the Politics and IR SBS was part of a series of such documents covering all the main subject areas, sitting in a broader schedule of activities, projects, and publications. The QAA assigned a Liaison Officer and a Coordinator to support the work of the Advisory Group, both of whom provided guidance on the new SBS Template during initial meetings with the Advisory Group. The Liaison Officer provided particular support to the Chair and Deputy Chair in the development of the SBS in terms of advice and guidance to ensure that that the final statement met QAA guidelines, as well as supporting the Advisory Group as a whole and acting as a contact between the QAA

and the Advisory Group. By contrast, the Coordinator focused more on the administration of the process, including the timescale for drafting, consultation and publication and ensuring that the SharePoint repository site had all the relevant documentation. Setting these timelines and providing an administrative infrastructure to support the Advisory Group to achieve these proved to be helpful in ensuring the work of the group progressed in a timely manner. QAA staff were also helpful in setting out expectations in relation to the final statement and pointing out where other SBS Advisory Groups had taken similar as well as different approaches to the organisation of the content. The QAA also supported the Advisory Group through the provision of training and development, including an online Equality, Diversity and Inclusion workshop that took place on 17 February 2022.

A further QAA priority related to the style and format of the SBS. Not unreasonably, as it was to be part of a standard series, the QAA were keen to ensure that the length of the document, format, and written style were reasonably consistent with those of other subject benchmarks. There were two areas in which the issue of consistency of format gave rise to discussion within the Advisory Group, and subsequently between the group and the QAA and both of which related to the 'standard' section headings. For the latest series of SBS, the QAA had introduced new sections relating to 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion', 'Accessibility', 'Sustainability', and 'Entrepreneurship and Enterprise Education'. The first area that gave rise to discussion was the relationship between 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion' and 'Accessibility'. In the drafting process, the Advisory Group found that there was potentially significant overlap in the scope and content of these two sections and asked the QAA if these could be merged. The QAA expressed the view that each should remain separate and the Academic Panel accepted their preference. The second area section related to Entrepreneurship and Enterprise Education. In this case the QAA had unusually provided a couple of pre-populated standard paragraphs of text relating to this topic. Advisory Groups could leave this text unchanged in the revised benchmark statement, they could amend it, or they could completely re-write the section. In discussions around this section of the SBS it was clear that pre-populated text – whether used or not by the Advisory Group – had a significant impact on the discussions around how to scope Entrepreneurship and Enterprise Education for Politics and International Relations. Concern was raised by some members of the Advisory Group that the language of enterprise and entrepreneurship was not commonly used in the discipline and some questioned if the title might be adjusted to include terms such as 'employability' or 'civic engagement' - which it was felt aligned to the spirit of entrepreneurship and enterprise, but captured more of an authentic disciplinary flavour. Again, the QAA expressed the preference for the standard heading to be used and the academic panel accepted this preference. The Advisory group did not however use the pre-populated text for this area unedited –

choosing instead to draw on the text to guide the focus of the four discrete paragraphs that were produced for this section.

The final areas in which the preferences of the QAA set the tone of the document related to the overall scoping and wording of the title as 'Politics and International Relations'. As noted above, this title had consistently been used since the publication of the first benchmarks at the beginning of the century. In retrospect, what is interesting is that at no point did the Advisory Group have a discussion among themselves or with the QAA as to whether this was the most appropriate title. Indeed, such a discussion would not necessarily have been overly esoteric. The Research Excellence Framework, a UK wide periodic assessment of research quality which allocates research funds to universities, label the subject 'Politics and International Studies' and as noted the main subject bodies covering IR in the UK and internationally (BISA and the International Studies Association (ISA)), also use the term 'international studies'. A range of explanations for this 'dog that didn't bark' could be advanced, but perhaps like the use of headings, it points to a willingness of the panel to work within the given titles and focus on the content given the presence of the norms that governed the discipline.

The working method adopted by the Advisory Group was to operate through a combination of full and sub-group activity. The full Advisory Group met three times in January, April and June 2022, being supported by working group meetings that took place between February and June. At the start of the process, the panel met and discussed two main topics. Firstly, how it would go about its work, and secondly what group members thought were some of the key issues that they would need to address in the writing process. There was agreement that given the extent of the work to be done, the difficulties of 'writing by committee' and the time schedules that the sub-group approach would work best. The content discussion, at this stage, was intended to identify the areas of broad consensus and highlight any issues that might prove controversial, and provide an opportunity for all Advisory Group members to have initial input into areas where they would have less detailed involvement. As it turned out the initial group meeting demonstrated a remarkable high degree of consensus that was to be sustained throughout the whole process.

Following this initial meeting, the main work of the following six months was undertaken in five sub-groups, each related to one or more of the main section headings: ' EDI and Accessibility', 'Sustainability', 'Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Education, 'Content, Structure and Delivery', ' Benchmark Standards'. Every Advisory Group member was a member of at least one sub-group, with the opportunity to be involved in more than one if they felt able. For ease of co-ordination, each sub-group had a lead member, who could act as the main point of contact to the Chair and Deputy Chair. While the new

sections of the SBS were covered by one of the sub-groups, there were some residual sections of the benchmark where the existing text required only limited and minor amendments. The review of these sections were dealt with by the chair and Deputy Chair.

The second meeting on the full Advisory Group in April 2022 provided an opportunity for the sub-groups to report back on their progress and raise any points with the full panel, where they felt wider discussion would be helpful. The meeting confirmed that sub-groups were broadly on track with their drafting and that while there had been healthy academic debates and sharing of different perspectives, no irresolvable issues had been encountered. By this point in the process, a key number of positional decisions had begun to emerge, around which the opinion congealed. The first was a general agreement on the importance of content diversity within the discipline. There was a conscious effort to try and avoid privileging some sub-fields over others. To an extent, this was an impossible task, as any process of authorship (collective or otherwise) entails processes of selection and had the panel tried to list every topic that has ever been taught in a Politics or IR degree, the document would have become impossibly long or opened the discipline to the accusation that ‘anything can be taught as politics and international relations’. The approach that was settled upon was to alphabetically list at least 17 areas that could be considered significant sub-fields and state the expectation that “the scope and breath of each course will vary” in relation to these (QAA, 2023: para 3.2). Indeed such diversity was not simply to be tolerated, but celebrated and nurtured, with the panel stating that “The diversity of courses offered by a range of different providers promotes student choice and opportunity and is crucial to the intellectual health and vitality of Politics and International Relations” (QAA, 2023: para 1.3). This was further amplified by an emphasis on the dynamic nature of the discipline and an evolving body of knowledge, enriched by rigorous debate and critical engagement. As such, the document was to be presented as a contribution to the developing nature of a contested discipline, rather than a fixed statement on what it should be.

A second editorial position related to digital and online education. In previous versions of the SBS, this had always been treated as an addition or variation from the in-person norm of delivery. By 2022, not only had the organic growth of online and digital delivery in higher education further developed, but the forced shift to online delivery as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic had been experienced by all academics and students. As a result, the panel agreed to take a ‘technologically neutral’ position, which focused on the type of learning, rather than the medium through which it would be experienced, stating that “With the integration of digital and online technologies into every aspect of life, all learning and teaching can take place through in-person or online formats, or a

combination of these. The appropriate combination of these will develop over time, reflecting developments in pedagogy, course design and the needs of students” (QAA, 2023: para 3.4).

Although the Advisory Group was constructed to include a wide range of perspectives and viewpoints from across the discipline, the process of subject benchmark statement review also included opportunities for external consultation with the wider subject community. There were two strands to this. The first was organised by members of the Advisory Group and was focused on engaging the academic community through the infrastructure of the PSA and BISA. At the PSA 2022 Annual Conference, held at the University of York, Advisory Group members held two sessions with members, in which they set out the main changes that were underway in the structure of the benchmark, shared the initial thinking of the panel and sub-groups on key areas, and invited comment and input on the emerging content. In addition, in Autumn 2022, the chair addressed the joint PSA/BISA Head of Department meeting, and led a discussion around the proposed changes. The discussion in each of these consultation fora further confirmed the broad consensus within the panel around the scope of the discipline and the absence of major issues of disagreement and schism.

The second strand was an online consultation process that was organised by the QAA and was common to all of the subject benchmark statements. This was promoted by the QAA via their website and through their standard communication channels to higher education providers and key stakeholders. The purpose of the consultation exercise which took place towards the end of September 2022 was to update the sector on the nature of the proposed changes to the SBS and to gain feedback on the revisions through a set of five generic questions that applied to all statements. These were namely: (1) ‘Overall, does the revised Subject Benchmark Statement continue to define the nature of the subject area and the academic standards expected of graduates?’; (2) ‘Does the information in the introductory sections successfully describe the context, characteristics and purpose of the subject?’; (3) ‘Does the section on benchmark standards adequately cover the skills expected of a graduate in the subject area?’; (4) ‘Do the sections on learning and teaching, content, and assessment provide an appropriate indication of these aspects of the subject area?’; (5) ‘Do the sections on Education for Sustainable Development, Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Education, Accessibility and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion clearly express the needs of the subject and students in relation to these areas?’. In addition to these generic questions, SBS Advisory Groups were also able to ask disciplinary specific questions. As a result, we asked ‘Does the statement provide an appropriate balance between Politics and International Relations?’, which generated a small number of responses and led a

number of minor revisions and a final sign-off by QAA before the 5th edition of the Politics and IR SBS was published in March 2023 (QAA, 2023).

Section 4: Things we might want future Advisory Groups to consider

In conclusion, this article has sought to shed light on the manner by which a SBS is developed from the perspective of the experience of members of the Politics and IR SBS Advisory Group. In so doing, the article demonstrates the balancing act that a SBS undertakes in terms of the complex and collaborative nature of the work which requires the need to address the evolving requirements of the discipline while adhering to standardized guidelines. Inevitably, the process of writing a SBS tends to highlight difficulties and things which you would do differently going forward. While the writing process for the statement was relatively smooth and the statement itself was well received, by both QAA and those academics who engaged with it (either the statement itself or the papers given on the statement both during and after its production at various conferences in both the UK and the US), inevitably there were things which might lead to improvements on the next SBS Advisory Group. However, there are certain overarching assumptions and issues which should be raised for the SBS groups in the future in order to aid their work and perhaps help them avoid some of the bumps in the road which we grappled with.

Perhaps the largest assumption which we made, and something we would have liked to have given greater attention to was the question over the boundaries of our subject specialism. Across the group, some members worked in schools and departments which only offer Politics and IR as separate degree programmes. Others worked in schools where a programme existed which combined the two, sometimes with the stand alone subjects as well. That made the difference between Politics and IR difficult to firmly establish. Additionally, some of the group members worked in schools which offered International Development programmes while others did not, and that added to discussion over the boundaries of our subjects. This is something the group would have liked to explore in greater depth, but the time constraints made it extremely difficult. It is also perhaps a discussion which might not lead to any concrete definitions, due to the differences between institutions, but the very nature of the discussion would perhaps have made our later discussions more informed and would have enabled us to streamline our process.

The differences between Politics, IR and International Development are extremely hard to establish, both in academic and practical terms. The SBS needs to work for UK universities and higher education establishments. It cannot, by its nature, be exclusionary or only apply in certain places. It needs to be all-encompassing, and therefore differentiating between the different labels in our discipline would have been both impossible and impractical. By using an inherent understanding of our discipline,

we were able to write a SBS which applied widely and accurately, without creating labels which were so specific as to be divisive.

Another potentially controversial issue which we did not tackle head on was the way in which we teach. Teaching has, rightly, become an important and innovative topic for discussion and, as a group, we discussed assessment and teaching methods within our own departments and schools. We could have included some discussion of innovative teaching or assessment, but we decided it was better not to do so. Such content would have become outdated very quickly. By including details of what is considered innovative practice at the time of writing, the content would have aged quickly and become irrelevant. There was also a recognition by the Advisory Group that straying into discussion on the way in which we teach would position the statement in a more 'political' context, given that a good deal of teaching in the discipline has been informed by traditional pedagogic practices that involve assumptions about the role of the academic and the role of the student. Whilst the Advisory Group recognised this state of affairs and the way that critical pedagogies challenge this assumption, there was a general view that adding this into the SBS went beyond the remit of the group. Such a view also reflected the reality that the sector is not homogenous when it comes to learning and teaching. Different departments and individuals have different practices, and what is considered innovative in one place might be considered unnecessary in another. Our view was therefore that there is space within higher education for a variety of practices and that newer isn't always better, whilst traditionally isn't always right either. Although we therefore concluded it was better not to be too prescriptive in relation to teaching practices and assessment so as to ensure that the statement was as inclusive as it could be across the sector, there may in retrospect have been space of a stronger statement at the start relating to the challenges posed to benchmark statements by critical pedagogies and a recognition of diverse teaching approaches.

This raises the question of the role of the QAA within educational debate. While a SBS clearly cannot be the place to settle debates unilaterally, they do offer a place for debate to start, as reflected in presentations that Advisory Group members have given at the PSA, ISA and APSA. However, as the subject benchmark statement is a statutory requirement and part of our Quality Assurance processes across higher education, there is a strong argument that debates should happen outside the QAA framework, with only settled resolutions working their way into the benchmark statements. To 'play around' with the expectations of our discipline seems unwise and potentially deeply undermining to the integrity of our work.

Data statement

This article does not draw on or create any new data in relation to the research that is presented.

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