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Article

What Defines a Discipline and How We Teach and Study It? The Changing Scope and Role of the Subject Benchmark Statement for Politics and International Relations (IR) and Its Implications For the Teaching and Study of Politics and IR in Higher Education

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Abstract

The paper asks whether there is a typical Politics and IR curriculum before reviewing the content and design of the revised fifth edition of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Politics and IR Subject Benchmark Statement that was launched in March 2023. The paper examines the manner by which the most recent edition differs from earlier subject benchmark statements and reflects on the implications of the strategic direction taken by the QAA to include new content areas that primarily focus on the development of disciplinary statements on Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), Accessibility and sustainability and Enterprise and entrepreneurship education (EED). The paper explores the implications of benchmark statements, given that while they are not a regulatory requirement, they nevertheless seek to define what can be expected of a graduate and

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are drawn upon by Higher Education Institutions (HEI) to inform the development and revision of Politics and IR undergraduate provision.

Introduction

The study of the *teaching* of Politics and International Relations (IR) has been the subject of increasing focus and attention among Politics and IR scholars. Over the last three decades there has been a significant expansion in scholarship that is specifically focused on the teaching and study of Politics and IR in both the UK and across the globe. This includes introductory textbooks (Butcher et al., 2023; Gormley-Heenan and Lightfoot, 2012; Ishiyama et al., 2015; Matto et al., 2021), articles on the origins and evolution of the discipline (Craig, 2020; Ishiyama et al., 2006), and articles that range from broad surveys on what has been written about in the teaching of Politics and IR (Bennion and Laughlin, 2018; Blair, 2015; Craig, 2014) to those that focus on simulations (Asal and Kratoville, 2013; Leib and Ruppel, 2020), assessment and feedback (Deardorff et al., 2009) and promoting employability (Jones and Lishman, 2023; Lee et al., 2016).

This scholarship has both shaped and equally been influenced by a number of events that have broadly converged at the same time. This includes the greater focus that has been applied to teaching quality in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and the attention that is increasingly attached to regulatory oversight such as by the Office for Students (OfS), the development of professional recognition schemes that recognise teaching excellence such as Fellowship of Advance HE, the availability of research funds for conducting scholarship on teaching and learning, the emergence of distinct professional group identities and networks such as the UK Political Studies Association (PSA) Teaching and Learning Network and the American Political Science Association (APSA) Teaching and Learning Conference, and finally academic journals that offer a dedicated outlet for teaching and learning publications such as European Political Science, Politics and the Journal of Political Science Education. An important outcome from these networks and scholarship has been the focus which has also been attached to identifying notable omissions in the teaching of Politics and IR. For example, Foster et al. (2013) and Evans and Amery (2016) demonstrated that despite the growth in research into gender and sexuality in the Politics and IR literature, this had not been mirrored in teaching practices.

Yet, despite all of this work, the wider question of what constitutes a Politics and IR undergraduate degree programme has been subject to less attention from a UK perspective. This includes discussions about what is core and periphery in a UK Politics and IR curriculum. This contrasts with North American scholars where there has been a greater level of discussion about what constitutes a Politics curriculum (see Diament et al., 2017; Plencner and Rank, 2024). This relative lack of discussion at a UK level is important given the pressures that the study of politics is facing at both a national and global level as a result of government interference. At a national level in the UK this includes emphasising the importance of science and technology subjects over social science subjects such as politics, while at an international level a number of governments are

evermore placing restrictions on the study of subjects like politics that may challenge their authority.

Beyond these issues, there is a broader point as to whether the study of politics in the UK is increasingly more of a 'science' as a result of a growing focus on the teaching of methods and quantitative statistics. This in itself is an important point of discussion given that when politics took off as an academic discipline in the UK after the Second World War with the founding of the PSA in 1949, it did so with a focus on 'studies' because the founding scholars did not consider politics to be a 'science' in the same way that it was viewed in the US through APSA. In making this point, a question might therefore be asked about the distinctiveness (or not) of a UK politics curriculum and the way in which the teaching of Politics in the UK is influenced by the role of Subject Benchmark Statements and regulatory and compliance matters that relate to the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and the OfS more broadly. A notable contrast here is with the implications of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the impact agenda in the UK which has even led to a special issue of *British Politics* being devoted to this issue (Moran and Browning, 2018). Moreover, given the contested and debated nature of the disciplines and teaching practices that are centred on the development of argument and critique, it might have been expected that there would be more in the way of critique of regulatory approaches that some critics may have viewed as leading to a tickbox and compliance culture (Bellingham, 2008). And while this has broadly speaking not happened as benchmark statements have instead tended to be viewed as part of a developmental framework approach (Williams, 2010), it is nevertheless the case that the relative absence of debate and discussion about benchmark statements and broader regulatory compliance in relation to the teaching of Politics and IR is surprising given the broader growth of academic teaching and learning publications at the disciplinary level. This contrasts with other disciplines such as Economics, Environmental Science, and Geography, where scholars have charted the development of benchmark statements (Mearman et al., 2018; Chalkley and Craig, 2000; Eastwood and Blumhof, 2002).

This paper seeks to address this lacuna by examining the context of the teaching of Politics and IR by exploring the revision to the 2023 Politics and IR benchmark statement. This paper examines the significance and implications of the revisions that were made to the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (2023a) Subject Benchmark Statement for Politics and IR that was published in March 2023. This was the fifth edition of the Politics and IR benchmark statement that was initially published in 2000, with subsequent revisions in 2007, 2015, 2019 and 2023, and was part of a broader review undertaken by the QAA of over 60 benchmark statements that is scheduled to continue until 2026.

In addressing these points, this paper is written from an insider researcher perspective, whereby the authors were members of the Subject Benchmark Statement Advisory Group which was formed in 2022. This was on the back of a QAA call for a Chair and Deputy Chair of the SBS which led to the respective appointments of John Craig and Ross Bellaby to these roles after an application procedure. Given that the benchmark statement represented the interests of the two main professional bodies, namely the PSA and the British International Studies Association (BISA), it was important that the members of the Advisory Group were able to represent these interests as well as external professional bodies. This mirrored the approach taken in other benchmark statements, whereby the final composition of the 22-member Advisory Group was the responsibility of the Chair and Deputy Chair with advice and guidance being provided by QAA staff.

In terms of structure, the paper proceeds as follows. First, it discusses the process and nature of the work relating to the writing of the Politics and IR benchmark statement. Second, it explores some of the fundamental questions about what constitutes the disciplines of Politics and IR and the way that this reflected in the makeup of degree programmes and the subject matter within them. Third, it charts the work that was undertaken relating to the inclusion of the new cross-cutting themes of equality, diversity and inclusion, sustainability, accessibility, and enterprise and/or enterprise education. Finally, it evaluates the overall role of benchmark statements and notes their importance in terms of focusing attention and providing a reference point for the Politics and IR academic community.

The Process of Benchmarking Politics and IR

Developments in the content, design and approach of Subject Benchmark Statements resonate with changes to the overall regulatory framework of UK HE, especially with the emergence of the OfS as the regulator of English HE and the introduction of the revised Quality Code in 2018 (QAA, 2023b). Until that point, Subject Benchmark Statements were key reference points throughout the UK HE Sector. Now, while Subject Benchmark Statements continue to act as specific reference points in quality assurance procedures for HE providers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, there is no longer a regulatory requirement for them to be applied across English HE providers. This is as a result of changes to the 2018 Quality Code and the introduction of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (UK Gov, 2017). Despite these regulatory changes, Subject Benchmark Statements continue to be a crucial point of reference across the UK HE sector that are used by HEIs to determine the academic standards at a subject level (Harrison, 2023). They inform decisions with regards to designing new degree programmes, conducting curriculum review of existing programmes, as well as to ensure the quality, rigour and high educational standard of individual modules within specific disciplines. In a way, Subject Benchmark Statements serve to map out the scope and content of each discipline (and indicate conjunction points with related disciplines), which enables HEIs to stay abreast with other education providers, including regarding recent developments within disciplines and state of art means of delivering and assessing teaching.

The Politics and IR Subject Benchmark Statement plays a significant role in the UK, and across the world, in informing the teaching of Politics and IR which is increasingly important in the light of ongoing global, regional and domestic challenges. From the battlefields of Ukraine to mass migration, and concerns over climate change to a rise in populist political parties and movements, the study and relevance of the disciplines of Politics and IR seem more prescient than ever. A central tenet in the study of Politics and IR is the importance of exposing students to critical debates affecting contemporary society as it is only through an engagement with, and understanding of, these debates that students learn how to grapple with the complexities of these issues and develop ideas to solve them.

Given that there already existed a Politics and IR Benchmark Statement, the process for reviewing and updating the document was on one hand a less challenging aspect than if it had to be written from scratch. But, on the other hand, the process was not simply one of tinkering at the edges given that for this iteration, new and important features introduced to the Subject Benchmark Statement template impacted upon how the disciplines of Politics and IR is understood and taught. More specifically, the new QAA benchmark

template introduced four new cross-cutting themes that respectively focused on the teaching of sustainability, accessibility, entrepreneurship and enterprise education (EED), and equality, diversity and inclusion. While the focus of these cross-cutting themes mirrors or reflect aspects that are already central to the study of Politics and IR, the overall impact is one which reflects a shift in terms of the emphasis that is attached towards professional and transferable skills development and graduate attributes. Such a development goes hand-in-hand with the ongoing discussion in many universities in the UK and globally on curriculum content which emphasise extra- and co-curricular experiences and the application of 'real world' learning that is underpinned by authentic assessment to support student learning (Quinlan, 2016).

To address these issues as well as the overall requirements of the updating of the benchmark statement, the work of the advisory group was divided into five groups, which members were asked to identify their preferences towards. The groups were namely: equality, diversity and inclusion; sustainability; EED; content, structure and delivery; and benchmark standards. Of these groups, the first three focused on writing text for the new sub-sections, while the latter two focused on key sections of the benchmark statement which included both the task of rewriting and adding to existing content. Of the latter two groups, the work relating to the content, structure and delivery of the benchmark statement was potentially the largest area of activity given that it included issues relating to curriculum, course structure, teaching and assessment, whereas the final group which looked at the core benchmark statements was potentially a more technical area given the focus on threshold and typical attainment standards. The majority of the work of the advisory group took place in 2022, with formal meetings of the whole advisory group being supported by the above sub-groups.

Politics and/or IR?

Many academic disciplines are regularly subject to debates about their disciplinary identity given the tendency in HEI's and regulatory bodies to draw fixed disciplinary boundaries that are often influenced by reporting requirements and budgetary discussions. The field of Politics and IR is no different. The study of Politics, or as it is sometimes referred to Political Science, is both separate and yet linked to IR. Both have their own disciplinary professional homes, such as the PSA and APSA for Politics/Political Science and BISA and the International Studies Association (ISA) for IR. Yet, within each of these bodies can be found networks and working groups that span across both sets of professional associations, thereby representing both the plurality of the disciplines and the fact that scholars more often than not align with one discipline more than the other. The teaching of Politics and IR equally reflects these boundaries, which are also influenced by budgetary and resource implications at an institutional level. In practical terms, this means that Politics and IR tend to be taught under the umbrella of one academic department, although there can be exceptions to this rule. For example, the London School of Economics has a Department of Government and a Department of IR.

The linked, but often separate nature of Politics and IR, has been reflected in the evolution of the Politics and IR Subject Benchmark Statement, which since the initial benchmark statement that was developed in 2000 under the leadership of Elizabeth Meehan has stressed the broad and contested nature of the disciplines. As Table 1 indicates, while the 2023 benchmark statement was the fifth version, the nature of change in previous versions has at times been very limited. This has led some authors to raise concerns about the

Table 1. Evolution of the Politics and IR Benchmark Statement.

	Chair	Number of members of advisory group	Study of the discipline	Details of curriculum	Reference to skills	Nature of changes
2000	Elizabeth Meehan	18 (all academics)	Broad focus	Yes	Limited	
2007	Jacqui Briggs	3 (all academics)	Broad focus	Yes	Limited	Limited
2015	Jacqui Briggs	14 (including QAA, Employer, and Student)	Broad focus	Yes	Yes	Notable. Additional information on assessment and feedback.
2019	Lisa Harrison	2 (other member was from QAA)	Broad focus	Yes	Yes	Minimal. Change of term widening participation to inclusivity.
2023	John Craig	22 (2 members from QAA, 1 from YouGov)	Broad focus	Yes	Yes	Significant. Revised structure and introduction of cross-cutting themes of EDI, accessibility, sustainability and employability, entrepreneurship and enterprise.

extent to which the Politics and IR benchmark statement has been too much of a 'codification of existing practice rather than a challenge to development' (Wyman et al., 2012: 236). While the 2019 Politics and IR Subject Benchmark Statement noted the scope of Politics and IR as 'broad' and 'often being contested or in movement', it also separated out the study of the field into 'politics', 'concerned with the developing a knowledge and understanding of government and society', and 'international relations', focusing on the 'engagement between states' (QAA, 2019). As a result, the field of Politics and IR was broken into two distinct disciplines.

The challenge for the QAA Politics and IR benchmarking advisory group that met from 2022 to 2023 was whether such divisions were still accurate or useful for those developing and delivering a Politics and/or IR degree. The question for the advisory group was whether the fields of Politics and IR should be detailed as separate, distinct siblings, and as such was a discussion on Politics *or* IR. Or whether such a distinction was impossible and so it should be framed as a single discipline, of Politics *and* IR. Or if the answer was somewhere between the two, and so could be referred to as Politics and/or IR.

This lack of clarity is both reflected and reinforced by the type of degrees offered by UK HEIs. Within the UK as of 2023, of the 77 HE providers surveyed on UCAS, 51 offer a degree in 'politics', 47 offer a single degree in 'international relations', and 68 offer a single degree in 'politics and international relations', and of these institutions 35 offer a degree in all three. In addition, some universities offer flexible degrees that enable students to integrate politics and/or IR into a more flexible programme by combining them with other social sciences (e.g. Criminology, Sociology), STEM subjects (e.g. Computer Science), arts and/or languages. Such degrees can be offered as Bachelor of Arts or as Bachelor of Sciences depending on the content and degree requirements. The structure of many HEIs promotes a modular system, where degrees consist of a series of standalone modules at each level or year of study with the student collecting enough credits to graduate. The years or levels of study can be distinguished as ever deepening the student's understanding as they move from 'introductory' modules to advanced versions, or by developing different research skills as the student progresses, or by offering new content and areas of study to the student each year. The student is ideally provided with a core set of modules that they must take to meet the requirements of the 'politics', 'international relations' or 'politics and international relations' degrees, with optional modules to give students opportunity to specialise in their area of interest and/or gain proficiency in applied analysis or languages. The problem for the advisory group was therefore twofold. First, there was a significant disconnect as to what is being practised in HEIs compared to what had been outlined in the existing Politics and IR Subject Benchmark Statement. Second, there was a lack of any clear means of usefully and accurately defining the discipline(s) going forward. This particularly applied to the study of IR where there has been a lengthy debate among scholars on what the study of IR should focus on (c.f. Acharya and Buzan, 2003; Agathangelou and Ling, 2004; Akram, 2024; Albert and Buzan, 2017; Baron, 2014; Bilgin, 2008; Brecher, 1999; Buzan and Little, 2001; Grenier, 2015; Kaplan, 1961; Kennedy-Pipe, 2007; Neal and Hamlett, 1969; Tickner, 2013; Turton, 2015). How the discipline(s) are understood is, therefore, contested and in a state of flux, which itself is an inherently important state to be in.

Addressing these developments in educational practice is not easy. From the position of the QAA benchmarking process, this represented a challenge in how to best convey the discipline(s) in such a way as to speak to and be useful for prospective students, university teachers and module convenors, curriculum designers, and university

management. In carrying out the benchmarking process, there were therefore multiple ways of approaching how best to define or frame the discipline(s) and different ways on how to best cut the cake and conceptualise our understanding. For example, whether it is in terms of levels of analysis, historically and chronologically, by organisations and actors, through normative or cross-cutting questions, or to not make any distinguishing lines at all (Baron, 2014). In comparison, there are those that examine if IR is a sub-field of political science (Reiter, 2016; Rosenberg, 2016). This is particularly noticeable within US academia where it represents a 'discipline within a discipline' (Waever, 2016).

An alternative approach that could be taken would be to break down the simple division between Politics and IR, and open it up more to the pluralism of the various sub-disciplines (c.f. on 'isms' Lake, 2011; on 'campfires' Sylvester, 2007, and on 'paradigms' Lapid, 1989). Indeed, there are important sub-fields that offer key ways of structuring and framing the understanding of the field, and for the Subject Benchmark Statement, a means of shaping various degree programmes in politics and IR. Security studies, IR theory, normative and political theory, public policy, party politics, systems and institutions, post-colonialism, gender and queer theory, urban studies, regional specialities, and environmentalism, are but a few of such sub-disciplines. Each of the sub-fields has its own internal set of ontological, epistemological, and methodological debates and approaches; its own dominant and marginal areas of inquiry and internal drivers that push the sub-discipline forwards. While some academic scholars might resist such pigeonholes, this approach does reflect a common practice in degree design. This approach supports the module-based teaching that underpins UK HE as it breaks degrees down into distinct and isolated teaching topics where the student is taught the basic theoretical premises, introduced to key examples or cases, and asked to report on their ability to recall the important content and apply the theory to practice. Specialised modules can include topics of particular overlap, of course, such as the ethics of war for example as it draws in political theory and security studies to establish an important normative sub-genre to the security field. From the student's perspective, they are given even greater flexibility, with the opportunity to build their own degree from the diverse specialisms on offer. While for departments, there is an opportunity to advertise what specialisms and strengths they possess from their particular staff combination, meaning each department has the potential of offering something on the whole unique.

The challenges with this approach, however, can be conceptual and practical. Conceptually, by dissolving the collective title of Politics and/or IR, the ability to discuss and convey what is useful or unique about the field(s) becomes increasingly difficult to convey to those on the outside, while at the same time running the risk of becoming absorbed into the broader school of social sciences. Furthermore, by reinforcing the modular approach, it limits opportunity for students to develop and deploy skills and understanding across their degrees. Research clusters can become increasingly specialised and fragmented and interdisciplinary conversations harder as fragmented boundaries become more entrenched.

On a practical level, such an approach relies on two big assumptions. First, a unique, highly specialised content provision relies on the availability of academic staff able to deliver that unique programme. In practice, this comes against challenges of staff retention, balancing research leave and funding buyouts against teaching needs that often leave programmes under-staffed, especially if there is little depth with regards to staffing and overlap between staff's expertise in a department. Second, students would have to be committed to the programme and understand it well from the beginning to end of their

studies. One of the advantages of the revolving door between Politics and IR-based programmes is that students often realise that they either do not want or cannot undertake studying one field halfway through their study. Then they can seamlessly move to another field considering the overlap between modules and degree requirements. That move would be either hard or impossible to achieve between more niche, specialised programmes.

In thinking these matters through, gaining an understanding from our students was particularly important and here we found that the student perspective suggested keeping boundaries broad and open was a helpful method to adopt in terms of our approach to the benchmark statement. More importantly, this reflected the significance that students and the benchmark advisory group attached to ensuring that we adopted an inclusive approach that was underpinned by flexibility. Such an approach acknowledged that the Subject Benchmark Statement for Politics and IR is hugely interdisciplinary, and ever expanding. In having Student Advisors throughout the process of discussing and writing the Subject Benchmark Statement, this allowed them to consider how Politics and IR looks to them and how they define their own discipline. For example, one of the Student Advisors who undertook an undergraduate IR and Global Development degree felt that sometimes Politics can overpower IR as a discipline. It was therefore important to them to recognise IR as its own discipline and consider the differences between an IR degree and a Politics degree. In this sense, it was important to ensure that both Politics and IR were covered as their own disciplines, but also acknowledge that they most often go hand-in-hand to complement each other. In practical terms, across Politics and IR degree programmes we see huge interdisciplinary crossovers, and it was therefore important that we empowered students to shape their own degrees by covering the core topics, while having the choice of elective modules which align with their particular interests. This includes topics such as human rights and security policy, which in turn give students the opportunity to expand their knowledge and hone in on the niches which interest them. This often means that students on the same courses actually study very different topics and modules and we would argue it is through such an approach that Politics and IR graduates possess a variety of knowledge bases which enable them to secure roles in a range of employment sectors. The advisory group decided, therefore, to take an inclusive approach, avoiding the temptation to consider politics and IR as two separate disciplines – seeking, as far possible to discuss politics and IR as a broad, diverse, and wide-ranging set of subject areas. In doing so, the advisory group hoped to achieve an approach that would be recognised and accepted by all academics working in the various areas and fields of politics and IR. To sense-check this, the advisory group took the opportunity to add a question on whether the coverage of both politics and IR in the draft benchmark statement was appropriate and balanced in the consultation on the draft statement. 100% of those who responded agreed with this statement and felt that coverage of Politics and IR in the revised subject benchmark statement was appropriate and balanced.

Developing the New Sub-Sections

A notable feature of all new subject benchmark statements is the inclusion of new cross-cutting themes of Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI); Sustainability; Accessibility; and Enterprise and/or Entrepreneurship education, all of which had strong alignment with existing scholarship on teaching and learning in politics (see Block et al., 2019; Jinnah et al., 2023; Jones and Lishman, 2023; Liu and Estamador-Hughson, 2023). While the

focus in these sections reflected the QAA's aim to re-evaluate the purpose of benchmark statements and to engage wider stakeholders, it also provided an opportunity to consider the underlying content with a view to future proofing individual benchmark statements. One of the questions which the Politics and IR advisory group debated was the extent to which these new areas of focus should be tackled as a collective group discussion or should be devolved into individual sub-groups given that there was an acknowledgement that many aspects were interlinked and spoke across Politics and IR as a whole. In the end, it was considered best from an operational perspective to establish three sub-groups that focused on EDI and accessibility, sustainability, and enterprise and entrepreneurship education.

Taking each of these themes in turn, the EDI sub-group began deliberations on the scope and content of the section by creating a 'reading list' of key points of works of Politics and IR scholarship which informed the thinking of each member in this area (e.g. Begum and Saini, 2019; Blatt, 2018; Choat, 2021; Le Grange, 2019; Sampaio, 2006). This process assisted the sub-group in mapping some of the key issues and areas they wanted to engage with and, through discussion of the work that each had brought to the table, identify key themes in their approach to these. At the heart of the approach were three core elements. The first, was a commitment to academic rigour and the development of students as critical thinkers who are able to make independent judgements based on the evaluation of argument and evidence. As such, the 'task' of the discipline was to equip students to think productively about a range of difficult, contested, and sometimes controversial issues. From this flowed a second aspect, related to a reflective and understanding of the development of Politics and IR as a discipline. The group drafted text that recognised that the interaction between the discipline and the social and political context in which it had developed. As they noted, it had both 'actively shaped' phenomenon such as imperialism and been shaped by them. On this basis, the group concluded that it was important for students of the discipline to critically engage with its history to develop a critical understanding how it had taken shape, and the processes through which some forms of knowledge have been produced and valued, and others have been marginalised. Third, the group recognised the current contexts of HE in existing terms of patterns of participation and success, and public and sector policy drivers to promote equality of opportunity and challenge patterns of unequal outcomes. This included the role of the OfS in terms of access and participation plans in England and Outcomes Agreements in Scotland as determined by the Scottish Funding Council.

This third element, focusing on the actions that Politics and IR course teams are taking to 'create learning communities that are accessible to all students (including those from less privileged and marginalised backgrounds) and in which they feel safe, welcome, able to participate and excel', dovetailed to the following section in the QAA benchmark on accessibility. As an SBS advisory group, 'accessibility' was primarily interpreted as relating to the experiences of student reporting, or choosing not to report, disabilities. The advisory group was minded to explore with the QAA the scope for this to be combined with the section on EDI as there appeared to be significant overlap between EDI and accessibility, but accepted the view of the agency that they would like to maintain the consistency of section headings across different statements. The second challenge was in the drafting of the section, as within the UK there are legal requirement that HE providers have an anticipatory duty to make reasonable adjustments relating to ensure that students who experience disabilities or impartments are not disadvantaged. As such, the panel interpreted the core of this section as being the advice that courses should obey the law!

The discussions in the sustainability sub-group benefitted from the underlying importance of sustainability and sustainable development to the study of Politics and IR as reflected in the evolution of the teaching of the discipline in recent decades because of the importance of these issues at a global level. While this reflected the clear relevance of sustainability to the study of Politics and IR as a means of demonstrating the interconnectedness of global affairs that is an integral theme to the understanding of the subject matter, the sub-group was clear that sustainability should not simply be seen as a separate pillar in terms of the teaching of Politics and IR and that it should rather be viewed from a holistic perspective that embraced wider questions that included important points such as social justice and global inequality. In this sense, the sub-group considered that sustainability should not simply be distilled to the teaching of sustainability and sustainable development and the equipping of students with knowledge and understanding about these issues.

A key theme which the sustainability sub-group wanted to advance was the importance of the teaching of sustainability as a means of critically examining the disciplines and also the fostering of alternative thinking to established approaches to the study of Politics and IR. This was therefore in keeping with critical pedagogy, where we want to emphasise the ways in which the teaching of sustainability should be aligned with the likes of problem-based learning (PBL) approaches that attach emphasis to active student engagement that had at its core a focus on authenticity that would enable students to see their own lives in the classroom (Bijsmans and Versluis, 2020). The sub-group were particularly keen that sustainability teaching and learning approaches should provide students with the opportunity for them to learn about how politics works from a practice perspective (Leigh and Freeman, 2019). This included, for example, being able to tackle critical debates such as addressing misinformation through the study of sustainability, which would in turn provide important information literacy skills (David and Maurer, 2022).

In this sense, a key theme which the sustainability sub-group wanted to advance was the importance of the teaching of sustainability as a means of critically examining the disciplines and also the fostering of alternative thinking to established approaches to the study of Politics and IR. This was therefore in keeping with poststructuralist and feminist thinking, where we wanted to emphasise that sustainability should not be viewed as being the preserve of a specialist module but should instead be a lens through which the teaching of Politics and IR should be taken throughout the curriculum. A consequence of this was that the sub-group wanted to stress the importance of the teaching of sustainability as being a means through which the Politics and IR curriculum should challenge established learning environments and assessment techniques. The sustainability sub-section therefore stresses the importance of using alternative assessments and in providing students with learning experiences that actively challenge them in thinking about established power structures.

The sustainability sub-group therefore considered the importance and relevance of the teaching of sustainability to go beyond knowledge acquisition at a subject level and to instead consider the implications of the challenges relating to sustainability through the likes of climate change in terms of how they impact on complex and interconnected issues such as race, gender and other forms of inequality. The sub-group drew on relevant guidance, such as the joint Advance HE (2021) and QAA framework on Education for Sustainable Development. Of paramount importance to the sustainability sub-group was the embedding of specific reference to students being provided with the necessary 'skillsets to decode, interpret and reject, when necessary, the multitude of narratives and propaganda filling social media'. Such skills are reflective of similar arguments put forward by

J. Cherie Strachan et al. (2019) who emphasise the importance of equipping female students in particular with the skills to respond effectively to political challenges.

In relation to the new EED sub-section, it was not immediately obvious how or in what ways Entrepreneurship might fit or intersect with the teaching and learning of Politics and IR. A characteristic feature of the Politics and IR curriculum is its critique of systems and processes – including a critique of capitalism and enterprise culture. In thinking about this issue, one question that the sub-group debated was whether this new sub-section section might be criticised, and potentially rejected, by Politics and IR academics. The sub-group was mindful that it was possible that colleagues might object to this new section and the language/concept of enterprise. At the very least, the sub-group had concerns that it would be difficult to 'sell' it to the Politics and IR academic community and recognised that some might object or push back as they may have seen the addition of this new section as being ideologically driven. A second point to address was that the new EED sub-section was the only new section of the subject benchmark statement to have pre-written generic text, written by the QAA in the form of two short paragraphs. While QAA colleagues were open to advisory groups adapting or editing these pre-written paragraphs, it was hard not to be influenced by this and to see the QAA statements as a steer for what the QAA expected to see in this section.

As with the other new sections, the sub-group working on the EED statement drew on relevant literature such as guidance from the QAA (2018) and the EntreComp framework (e.g. Bacigalupo et al., 2016; Carter, 2021; Williams, 2019). The draft that was developed explored not only how the politics and IR degree develops and teaches enterprise behaviours, attributes, and competencies, but also how these attributes and competencies are promoted and assessed. As a non-vocational degree, this new sub-section gave the discipline an opportunity to state the many ways in which an undergraduate degree in Politics and IR can develop student skills, behaviours and competencies, and positively impact upon their future careers. This prompted discussion on the place of critical thinking and critiques of power within the curriculum – and required some reassurance that the approach taken did not undermine or challenge critical approaches of the discipline. Much of the discussion regarding EED was practical. For example, how best to promote the employability skills students acquired from a Politics and IR degree? Some colleagues wanted to see reference to a wider range of specific jobs and careers within the EED section, others were less keen and thought this could set up unrealistic expectations from our students. Another area of discussion was in relation to placements and internships, where colleagues wanted to ensure that the EED section remained sufficiently broad – and referred not just to external placements or internships as examples of how students might develop and be assessed on EED (Carter, 2021), but also to experiential learning opportunities that might be found in modules at any level of the undergraduate degree. That said, the sub-group was mindful that such opportunities still need to equip students with critical, analytical and transferable skills to be effective.

Conclusions: Gaining Feedback and Reflecting on the Benchmark Statement

While the composition of the advisory group reflected a range of HEIs, included representatives from across devolved nations, student members and employers, and ensured a plurality of disciplinary representatives from within the Politics and the IR communities, it was important to obtain as wide a range of feedback as possible. This included having

a roundtable panel at the PSA Annual Conference in York in April 2022 to gather feedback and reactions from the wider Politics and IR academic community. By the Autumn of 2022 the advisory group had completed a draft text which was circulated by the QAA in September 2022 for national consultation. Feedback largely related to the structure and positioning of the four new sub-sections on the new SBS template–a matter beyond SBS advisory group control. Around 92% of respondents agreed that the section on EED clearly expressed the needs of the subject and students. This especially relates to the changing nature of Politics and IR degrees and the changing expectations of what a graduate with those degrees should know and be able to do. As disciplines are becoming more applied, there is a greater demand for graduates to have a deeper understanding of research design and methods of analysis–and be able to apply it to solve real-life problems. In general, the emphasis is on analysis rather than knowledge. In addition to improving training in these areas, this requires strong investment from Universities into technical solutions (user-friendly when it comes to undergraduate students) for data collection, management and analysis. On the positive side, this increases the relevance of Politics and IR and enables a stronger contribution from the discipline in addressing societal challenges relating to power, inequality, and governance. It also creates opportunities for collaborations with external stakeholders and practitioners from governmental and non-governmental organisations, from public and private sectors, as well as increases capacity for interdisciplinary collaborations.

In reflecting on the revised Politics and IR Subject Benchmark Statement we recognise the continuing struggle between setting down relatively fixed statements on how the disciplines could or should be taught and the ever-changing nature of the disciplines of Politics and IR–both in terms of how they are taught and researched. While the importance of substantive knowledge and problem-driven understanding of the discipline remains paramount, the disciplines are nonetheless increasingly applied in nature. This heralds a shift in terms of the teaching of the subject matter and also the way that the relevancy of Politics and IR is conveyed both to potential students and also to wider stakeholders, from university managers to government. What is particularly noticeable is that while the new cross-cutting themes may be viewed as a constraint that has been applied by the QAA to the teaching of Politics and the IR and thereby reducing the content and debate on what are deemed by some to be the core issue of applying knowledge, in reality these are themes which have been increasingly been at the forefront of the discipline in recent decades – and have now been made explicit through the new structure of the subject benchmark statement.

In considering the issue of the relevance and importance of Subject Benchmark Statements, while the advisory group was conscious that the role of subject benchmarks statements has evolved in terms of the way that they are viewed by regulatory bodies as a result of the UK's devolved structures, we were nevertheless of the view that they play an integral part not only in terms of the framing of the teaching within the disciplines, but equally in terms of the external profile and the defence of the disciplines. The latter is an evermore prescient point given the budgetary challenges that many HEIs find themselves in, and where in contrast to some other subjects, the so-called added value of studying a Politics and IR degree may at times be less clear to senior university managers.

Consequently, it is our view that the Politics and IR Benchmark Statement helps to shine a light on the continued importance and relevance of the disciplines and also acts as an important reference point given the growing financial pressures in HE that often involve questions and statements from government ministers about the relevance of

non-STEM disciplines. A central aspect of these discussions is the very diverse nature of the Politics and IR curriculum, where we recognise the strength of the plurality and diversity of the subject matter. This is reflected in the interconnected and interwoven nature of the content of the benchmark statement, as well as in the new cross-cutting themes. The addition of new cross-cutting themes within the subject benchmark statement are beneficial, we argue, as they make the open and critical nature of the disciplines–as reflected in the importance of feminism, gender and queer theory, for example,–explicit. Something that may have been less visible in earlier Subject Benchmark Statements. While we consider the diversity of the curriculum to be a real strength, we equally recognise that some may ask why areas such as political theory are not considered as a sub-discipline in the way in which they were in earlier benchmark statements. One of the clear differences of the new 2023 subject benchmark statement is its rejection of the idea of core sub-disciplines or areas, or any aspect deemed to be core – as no area or 'sub-discipline' is prioritised in this way as core in this edition of the benchmark statement. This is an issue that we spent a good deal of time debating and, in the end, we recognised that the curriculum is now far more diverse than in previous editions of the benchmark statement and that the teaching of Politics and IR often takes place in a myriad of academic departments. We see this as a good thing and as evidence of a thriving discipline. In this context, we see the real strength of the Politics and IR curriculum in the values, culture and ethos that is attached to the teaching of the subject matter and the knowledge and understanding that students acquire and the way that Politics and IR students are exposed and challenged to a range of methods and approaches which enable them to be change agents who play a critical role in defending the virtues of democracy in an increasingly undemocratic world.

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