Book Section:
Rofe, J. S. (2025) Europe: United Kingdom “Teaching IR Theory in the United Kingdom”. In: Frueh, J., Ala, J., Murphy, M.P.A. and Diehl, P.F., (eds.) The Palgrave Handbook on the Pedagogy of International Relations Theory. Political Pedagogies. Palgrave Macmillan Cham, pp. 691-703. ISBN: 9783031720710.

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-72072-7_55

Palgrave Handbook on the Pedagogy of International Relations Theory

"Teaching IR Theory in the United Kingdom"

For Jamie Frueh, Jacqui DeMatos Ala, Michael Murphy, Paul Diehl

---

The United Kingdom's relationship with the field of International Relations (IR) is longstanding and challenging. As a lift off point for the journey that follows; the question of what constitutes the United Kingdom itself, or 'The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland' to give the current configuration of the sovereign state its full title, is one that has been raised more in the twenty-first century's opening decades than throughout the previous century. In 2023 it is contested across a range of issues not seen for generations. This is manifest in debates about the UK's place in the world; Europe and Brexit; the arrangement of the different nations that make up the United Kingdom – i.e. England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. Equally, and importantly for any comprehensive discussion of International Relations, the United Kingdom has a particular historical influence upon discourses of coloniality and decoloniality. All of which we will return to in the course of this chapter. The implications of all these debates are considerable for the way the International Relations is understood and, importantly here, taught in this "sceptered isle" to borrow from a quintessentially British text: William Shakespeare's *Richard II*. (Bate, 2010).

This chapter seeks to address the practice of teaching International Relations theory to audiences in the United Kingdom. It will begin in doing so by laying out the context in which the field of IR sits in terms of the student body, the current context of UK Higher Education (HE), the structures of these institutions, and the global marketplace of HE. From there it will turn to the influence of teaching practices in United Kingdom HE, and how they shape IR and its engagement with theories of IR, before looking specifically at the field of IR theory and share the authors own experiences in doing so.

Understanding the teaching of IR in the UK is an inherently reflexive undertaking. It is important to note the central role the United Kingdom played in global affairs that preceded the foundation of the discipline - and while waning - has played since; at the same time as the discipline developed after the First World War with a fulcrum of UK based scholars, publications, and students. Equally, other scholars in this volume may rightly note that International Relations did not begin in the UK; there is no meaningful claim to the uniqueness here, each nation and actor comes to the field with its own antecedents.

International Relations in a UK context.

Understanding who studies International Relations in the United Kingdom provides us with a starting point to not least as many who have studied the field go on to practice it in various forms both inside and outside Higher Education; and may end up teaching the subject to future generations of students.

The field of International Relations in the United Kingdom is an endeavor firmly rooted in the University sector, also known as the Tertiary and/or Higher Education sector. There is little, if any, and certainly nothing explicitly, taught in the UK secondary education sector addressing IR. This immediately puts the field at odds with, for example, History. Historical studies feature consistently in the secondary syllabi (age of 12-18), and importantly, is a field that a significant portion of UK undergraduates enter the discipline by having taken a history A-Level (the UK secondary level/school leavers assessments). It is important to recognise the diversity of the way history, and other subjects are taught in secondary education, not least as it opens up possible avenues leading into discussing IR theory. Particularly, concepts of power for example may be touched upon in the syllabus of a Politics A-Level. The Politics A-level is the poor-relation to history in terms of student numbers. UK based secondary students studying history consistently number 45,000 each academic year, while Politics students only recently topped 20,000 (PSA Website https://www.psa.ac.uk/psa/news/level-results-2022-more-take-politics-ever) Equally, in relation to students who study IR, these subject areas are by no means a pre-requisites to studying International Relations, nor indeed

Politics. What this means is students beginning their studies in IR programmes come from a diverse set of subject backgrounds.

There are further structural challenges not unique to IR programmes but are experienced by institutions throughout the UK higher education sector. There has been a vast increase in students' numbers overall: doubling within a generation from the early 1990s through to 2021/22 when there were 2.86 million students at UK higher education institutions (Bolton, 2023) has undoubtedly made Higher Education in the UK more accessible on the whole (ONS, 2016). Equally, that has exposed the sector to more challenges in making sure that HE is accessible to all parts of society especially groups marginalized on the basis of race, gender and sexual orientation as identified as protected characteristics by the 2010 United Kingdom's Equalities Act. As a field of study International Relations is part of this as much as any other discipline.

A further feature of the UK's Higher Education context which impacts the way in which IR theory is taught lies in the internal structures of UK Universities. Firstly, IR is not taught in every one of the UK's 144 universities, and certainly not in a departments or schools incorporating the name of the field. However, just because an institution does not have a 'department' of 'International Relations', that IR theory is not addressed: it is will often be taught in related fields such as law, philosophy or history. Equally, within UK HE there is a notable heritage of joint degrees or dual honours, where students have twin specialisations. This means that International Relations often ends up in partnership with other subjects, usually from the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities. Examples would include: International Relations and Law; History and International Relations; International Relations and a language. Despite the myriad of combinations, the most common marriage is between "Politics and International Relations". This marriage reflects an additional structural feature of teaching International Relations theory in the UK. Most departments that teach IR Theory, are "Departments of Politics and International Studies" within faculties and/or colleges of the Social Sciences: often known by the abbreviation POLIS, as found at the University of Cambridge or the University of Leeds. Thus, IR theory finds itself housed within this marriage of Politics and International Studies. Although, the exact nature of this relationship will

vary between universities, according to perspective held by their academic staff, it has a significant impact on how IR theory is defined. In these types of relationships IR theory is routinely seen as part of 'International Studies', just as Political theory will considered as a subfield of 'Politics'. The bleeding of teaching Political and International Relations theory into each other theory shapes the form and function of IR Theory teaching as it is often the same scholars that teach 'theory' within these departments reflecting their own antecedents, research interests and approaches. As such the function of teaching 'theory' may trump the specificity of Political theory and IR theory. In turn this impacts the way IR theory is taught: Political theory has a much longer heritage in being taught at UK Universities; and IR theory reaches back into Political theory from before the discipline itself emerged after the First World War.

The teaching of IR theory in the UK is further impacted by the country being a leader in the marketplace of Global Higher Education. The UK's most renowned institutions, steeped in historical narratives of UK society, regularly feature in any measure or league table of global universities, behind only US based institutions in volume at the top of those rankings. Universities such as 'Oxford' and 'Cambridge'; those in the 'Golden Triangle' – taking in the two and adding central London institutions as the third pivot; and the 'Russell Group' representing the leading 24 research focused Universities are notable features of the UK's Higher Education *brand*. The UK's Higher Education brand, often represented by a self-funded lobby group of 140 institutions: 'Universities UK', markets itself globally, particularly to attract 'overseas' students. The value of students from outside the United Kingdom is at least two-fold. Firstly, the value to the learning experience of having students from a variety of geographical and cultural backgrounds in classes can be usefully restated. Secondly, and recognising the increasing commercial driver to UK HE, overseas students bring in valuable revenue to Universities. Overseas fees are typically three times as much per year as the fixed levy for UK students of £9,250 GBP. Despite the cost many overseas student perspective aspire to attend institutions with high rankings even it the value of university rankings are contested (Nesbitt and Rofe, 2021) The prize of obtaining a degree from a UK institution attracts students from as far as Malaysia and Chile to places such as Colchester, Canterbury and Carlisle, to the Universities of Essex, Kent and Cumbria respectively. Alongside the importance of

the informal networks that the exchange of students provides they are aligned with research and institutional partnerships at a variety of levels that contributes to what has been recently acknowledged as 'Knowledge Diplomacy' (Alijeva et al, 2024).

The importance of UK higher education as a vector of Knowledge Diplomacy, and its role in teaching International Relations Theory, has not been lost on successive British governments as a strategic plank in UK foreign and security policy. In the 2023 follow up to the 2021 UK strategy entitled: *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review,* the government lauds the 17 UK Universities that make the top 100 ranking and commits to protect the sector, This is afforded more significance than the UK's place on the United Nations' Security Council as a permanent member (HMG, 50-53). Higher education is an important element in understanding of UK 'Soft Power'. The British Council, an arm's length publicly funded body that serves as "the United Kingdom's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities", noted in its 2020 report "Global Britain: the UK's soft power advantage" that "World-famous higher education institutions such as Cambridge, the London School of Economics, Oxford and Edinburgh are among the most popular destinations for international students exactly because they offer valuable, high-quality education and are centres of research excellence". (British Council, 2020). Thus, it is clear is that the UK Higher Education sector is a key economic and cultural asset to cultivating the UK's attractiveness alongside the Royal Family, the BBC and the English Premier League (men's). The unique blend of contextual elements provides a foundation, set on evolving topography, to understand the environment in which International Relations theory is taught at UK Universities.

UK IR Theory Teaching Practice

The key function in sharing this context is that the position of the UK, its institutions, students and scholars in the global marketplace of higher education reflects important aspects of International Relations: distributions of power and resources; accessibility and governance; migration and economic prerogatives. While these may not be unique to the United Kingdom, they are fundamental features of international relations, reflecting the academy's desire to understand international relations as a

whole, scholars have sought to offer and apply a range of theoretical approaches. It is to their application in the classroom that this chapter now turns.

So what does teaching IR theory look like in the classroom? The first thing to say here is that for all the possibilities of diversity either or both of the student body and the curriculum, the outcome in a UK IR classroom is the remarkably similar in terms of content and form. IR Theory is typically included as a core element of an IR degree, and is usually taught as a singular module often in the first year. This has been the status quo at most universities since the discipline originated at the end of the First World War. However, this does not exclude IR theory from inclusion in other modules even if it does not precisely align with programme level learning outcomes: a requirement for UK University's into which module level learning outcomes fit. This tiering of learning outcomes might suggest a congruence of programmatic and module level outcomes leading to a rounded holistic learning experience. This relies on the utilisation of synoptic learning, where students understand and make use of links between different elements of their learning; and synoptic assessment, where assessments in one module of a programme are linked to those in others. This can occur either across modules within an academic year, or even more ambitiously across years of study. However, this practice is underdeveloped across the UK University sector (Constantinou, 2020). Thus, the predicament face when teaching IR theory is that despite the intentions of those writing learning outcomes and the structural forces that lend themselves to coordination, students routinely report that they find it difficult to see and apply linkages between different aspects of their learning. As such the current vogue to consider synoptic thinking risks becoming a further casualty of structural conformity to established patterns and practices.

Those pattern and practices are seen in the mode of delivery that proliferates at UK Universities, particularly in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, namely, a weekly lecture for the duration of the module (typically 10 or 12 weeks), and accompanying weekly tutorial. The lecture presented to the entire class, would routinely focus on one theory while the weekly tutorial with the class broken into smaller groups would allow for more discursive engagement on what was covered in the lecture. Teaching a module is often the task of a single permanent member of

academic staff, although if team taught individual theory would be covered by a staff member with expertise in a specific theory. Tutorials would be run by other colleagues including those from more junior ranks. The consistency in content and approach with which IR theory is taught across UK Universities is remarkable. It is a function of a longer term and broader trend to comparability between university programmes as a function – intended in large part – of governmental policies to provide 'choice' to students as consumers of higher education; and reflects the distinct trend to neoliberal thinking in UK Higher Education that is well documented and equally contested (See Maisuria and Cole; 2017; Bamberger et al, 2019; and Bronwen & Bell eds., 2023)

Nonetheless within the modality, there is scope for development and innovation in the way that the subject matter is delivered. Numerous module leaders and team members make use of a variety of pedagogic approaches engaging digital technologies. However, this approach is not universal for a number of structural reason. Many IR scholars in the UK are orientated towards research excellence as pathways towards recognition and promotion. This reality has been produced by governance and regulation frameworks. The Research Excellence Framework REF replaced the Research Assessment Exercise in 2008, the latter having operated since the 1980s, as the UK government's periodic assessment of research output; with the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) only introduced in 2017. The time gap between the introduction of the REF and the TEF can be seen as indicative of the implicate importance given to research over teaching by these instruments. Further, the introduction of fees for UG students in 1998 with this amount raised to £9000.00 annually in 2012 and £9250 in 2017, and student loan system means that students typically graduate with debt of around £50k. Consequently students paying these fees demand high-quality teaching experiences.

The introduction of teaching specific contracts for academic staff by UK HE in the last decade is a directly result of institutions endeavouring to navigate the fallout precipitated by the above policy choices. While teaching has always been a part of most UK academic contracts, there is an increasing divide between academics on "Research and Scholarship" and those on "Teaching and Scholarship" contracts. This situation presents management challenge in balancing the *amount* of teaching that different colleagues do, with the former undertaking teaching for 30-40% of their

workload, and the latter typically having 50-60%. The implications of this for teaching is that those on teaching focused contracts, with teaching focused promotion paths are more likely to engaged in dynamic teaching practices than those on research ones. This does not exclude those on research contracts from being innovative in their teaching, nor does it guarantee that those on teaching contract do not still continue with established lecture-tutorial format but this two-tiered hiring and promotion system tends to incentivise better teaching practice for those on teaching contracts.

The essay now turns to the subject matter of what is delivered across IR theory lectures and tutorials. Most notably, after a comparison of 10 IR theory course outlines from various of UK universities there is remarkable consistency in the topics included in IR Theory modules. All start by 'framing the discipline' in some way, and then proceeds to the theories of Realism and Liberal Internationalism. The weekly topics that follow these also remain consistent across time and institutions.

The Theories of IR module I convened in the School of Politics and International Studies at the University of Leeds in the autumn term of 2022 is typical across a 11-week syllabus:

1. Welcome to International Relations
2. Realism and Liberalism
3. The Liberal International Order
4. Feminism(s)
5. Constructivism
6. Critical Theory
7. English School
8. Cosmopolitanism and Environment
9. Assessment Guidance
10. Critical Reflections on Theory
11. Post-Structuralism

In inheriting the module with learning outcomes, mode of delivery and assessment fixed, individual agency was limited. Nonetheless, there was scope to impact the teaching Thus, it was with deliberate intent that I moved the Feminism 'week' up in the schedule from the 8th to 4th being mindful that the weekly schedule creates a hierarchy in the minds of students. The hierarchy is reinforced by the mode of assessment, in this case a single summative essay of 3000 words submitted at the

end of the module's duration on a single topic based on one of the weekly topics with a non-compulsory formative essay plan preceding that. This mode of assessment means that a students can decide to focus on an essay on a topic early in the module and then spend time preparing for it, in preference to contemplating topics delivered later in the module. There are many vectors here: the timing and sequencing of the assessment, the number of assessment points, the role of the essay – the most dominant form of assessment for IR theory, as it is for IR across the UK.

To reinforce the point made about the personnel involved in teaching, the weekly lectures on Feminism, Cosmopolitanism and Environment, and Post-Structuralism were delivered by colleagues with subject matter expertise and the ten tutorial groups spread across five colleagues including three Teaching Assistants. The makeup of the team reflected the availability of colleagues as much as it did subject matter expertise. The diversity of colleagues involved made for an enriched teaching and learning experience for colleagues, myself as module convenor and, most importantly, the students.

To support students in such as module a variety of 'learning materials' would be provided. In line with other modules that a student would experience in their studies, they would be provided with a module outline, or course handbook containing the mode of assessment, schedule of classes (lectures and tutorials), dedicated reading list divided into those weekly topics and information on access to support from central library services etc. This is shared digitally via an institutional Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) or LMS (Learning Management System) as a central support to student learning. These systems are often known by their brand name: Moodle, Firefly Canvas and Blackboard and are the subject of considerable pedagogic debate as to their utility with a 2009 panel discussion at the Association for Learning Technology suggesting the 'VLE is Dead' (Weller, 2007; Reesem 2015) only for the pervasiveness of them to prompt a debate - reminiscent of Mark Twain's remarks about his own demise- 10 years later.

So while the VLE is pervasive in UK HE, it is not typical in UK IR teaching to assign a single 'textbook' to a module. Here IR theory perhaps goes against the trend. While

many modules would eschew singular texts in lieu of asking students to develop critical analysis skills by exposing students to 'multiple sources', core IR theory modules tend to be supported by several dedicated textbooks. These come with near identical titles and remarkably similar tables of contents which marry up neatly with the weekly topics that populate many IR theory module outlines. There is a clear symbiotic relationship between modules topics and contents pages. *International Relations Theories* edited by Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, Steve Smith; *International Relations Theory* by Oliver Daddow; and *Theories of International Relations* by Scott Burchill and Andrew Linklater are three examples from a variety of texts. They are longstanding features of IR Theory teaching: as of 2023 in their 5th, 3rd and 6th editions respectively (with Jacqui True and Richard Devatak having stepped up from contributors to editors of the latter). This author worked with the recently passed, and much missed, Professor Andrew Linklater as a master's student when the first edition was published in 1998 and assigned the 6th edition in teaching an IR Theory module some twenty five-years later. The continuity is noteworthy and structural beyond the individual.

Fundamental to the teachings of IR is to look at critiques of institutional powers and practices, and exploring both IR Theory specifically and the whole discipline are no different as a subject matter in and of itself. This is particularly the case in the UK given the shaping impact of the British Empire. As we know the genesis of the field of IR began at a point in time in which the British Empire was still geographically vast in terms of territory and influence. From there the development of the field and the Theories that shaped it during the second half of the twentieth century coincided with de-colonising of the vast majority of the territories once part of the British Empire; and relative decline of UK on the international stage. This has had an influence on the way IR theory is taught in any number of ways that would warrant many PhDs, but point to two. Firstly, in the past decade there has been considerable efforts devoted too 'decolonising curricula' and 'decolonising universities' – and discourses around such endeavours. Many Universities, not least those that have the longest histories and most established academic reputations are steeped in colonial histories of their own with former investments and endowments having come from those who benefit from colonial practices, including the slave trade. Amongst most telling example being the "Rhodes must fall" campaign addressing Sir Cecil Rhodes statue at Oriel College Oxford and his role as architect of apartheid in South Africa.

The statue's survival is noteworthy for studies of IR during a period when many other in the UK were being reconsidered and challenge: most notably, the toppling of the statue of Sir Edward Colston (1636-1721) a merchant, slave trader, member of parliament and philanthropist in Bristol in June 2020. Addressing issues of race and discrimination with International Relations theory teaching, as it has been through broader British and global society, has been absent for much of the twentieth century. The development of Critical Race Theory since the 1990s, originating in civil rights activism, has influenced IR with the important multi-authored article "Why is mainstream International Relations Blind to Racism" being published a month after the toppling of Colston's statue in Bristol (Haastrup et al, 2020). The impact on IR theory syllabi has yet to be fully realised: as an individual change I referenced Haastrup's article directly in the first and last class of the module.

The second, particularly British dimension to the evolution of IR, comes with the with respect to the English School of IR Theory. Teaching the English School to those studying in England, in the English Language, at English Universities which provided the discursive space for the School to be born is both a tautology and an exemplar of a British dimension to teaching IR. The "English" label is not exclusive and yet to students being introduced to discourse about the prevailing global power structure during the 1970s and subsequently, very often associate the label with their locale. That so many scholars of the English School were not British Passport holders, nor exclusive working in the UK requires a particular precision needed in language and analysis in teaching this approach within a particularly British context. This precision is manifest in my own practice in the deconstruction of the English School as a concept: in peeling back the layers of identity and demonstrating how self-referential IR theory can be.

Conclusions

Our chapter outlines the background to who are the UK's International Relations students, what is the institutional, political and cultural context in which they study this field and how IR Theory is delivered in practice. That practice allows for individual agency on behalf of teachers. Reflecting upon the state of the field in the United Kingdom three clear features emerge. Firstly, International Relations theory

is taught as a foundational module in the majority of International Relations undergraduate programmes, and that these programmes are situated within departments of Politics and International Relations – POLIS –reflecting the marriage of Politics and International Relations in a UK context. There is opportunity for further development of theoretical perspectives in more specialized courses and at the postgraduate level and these are delivered in line with the expertise of the scholars involved and, befitting the institutional marriage, are typically a blend of IR and Political theory. Equally, teaching of IR theory is not limited to modules that explicitly address the field: theories appear in any number of modules, and often constitute an assumed level of knowledge as students progress to advanced levels. Secondly, a variety of scholars are responsible for convening IR theory modules, and a greater variety contribute to their delivery. This makes the third feature perhaps all the more remarkable: the near universal pedagogic approach on the one hand, and the content of the syllabi on the other in sharing IR theory with UK students. The proliferation of weekly lecture on topic X or Y and accompanying tutorial is, and remains pervasive. The structure provides rationales for the behaviours of scholars, students and university administrators and managers that are not limited to the study of IR Theory.

Bibliography

Alijeva, L., Gore, T., Macdonald, S., & Rofe, J.S. (eds.), 2024. *Knowledge Diplomacy*. Manchester University Press, Manchester.

Bamberger, Annette & Morris, Paul & Yemini, Miri. (2019). Neoliberalism, internationalisation and higher education: connections, contradictions and alternatives. *Discourse*. 10.1080/01596306.2019.1569879.

Bate J. and Rasmussen, E. (eds.), 2010. *Richard II*. The RSC Shakespeare; London: Macmillan.

Bhambra, G.K., Bouka, Y., Persuad R.B., Rutazibwa O.U., Thakur, V., Bell, D., Smith, K., Hasstrup, T., and Adem, S., 2020. "Why Is Mainstream International Relations Blind to Racism". *Foreign Policy*. Available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/03/why-is-mainstream-international-relations-ir-blind-to-racism-colonialism/ (accessed 26 May 2023).

Bolton, P. 2021. *Higher Education Student Numbers*, London: House of Commons Library.

Bronwen M.A. Jones, Stephen J. Ball eds. (2023) Neoliberalism and Education. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis.

Constantinou F. 2020. What is synoptic assessment? Defining and operationalising an as yet non-mainstream assessment concept, *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 27:6, 670-686, DOI: 10.1080/0969594X.2020.1841734

Daddow, O., 2017. *International Relations Theory*. Third edition. Sage: London

Burchill S & Linklater (eds.), 1998. *Theories of International Relations*. First edition. Red Globe Press: London.

Devatak, R. & True, J. (eds.), 2022. *Theories of International Relations*. Sixth edition. Red Globe Press/Bloomsbury: London.

Dunne, T., Kurki, M., Smith S (eds.) (2020). *International Relations Theories*. Fifth edition. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Haastrup T, Bhambra G, Rutazibwa O, Smith K, Bell D, Persaud R, Bouka Y, Thakur V & Adem S (2020) Why Is Mainstream International Relations Blind to Racism? [Feminist Foreign Policy Cannot Ignore Race]. *Foreign Policy* [Blog post] 03.07.2020. https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/03/why-is-mainstream-international-relations-ir-blind-to-racism-colonialism/

Maisuria A., and Cole M. (2017) The neoliberalization of higher education in England: An alternative is possible. *Policy Futures in Education*, Vol.15 (5) 602–619.

Office for National Statistics, 2016. *How has the Student Population Changed*. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/articles/howhasthestudentpopulationchanged/2016-09-20

Reese, Sasha (September 2015). "Online learning environments in higher education: Connectivism vs. dissociation". *Education Information Technology*. 20 (3): 579–588.

UK Government, 2010. "Equality Act". Her Majesty's Stationary Office, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents

UK Government, "Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world." His Majesty's Stationary Office https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1145586/11857435_NS_IR_Refresh_2023_Supply_AllPages_Revision_7_WEB_PDF.pdf

Weller, Martin (2007). *Virtual learning environments: using, choosing and developing your VLE*. London: Routledge. pp. 4–5.