Equipping students to study the politics of global challenges: Embedding skills, belonging, employability and 'making a difference' in a first-year module

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Abstract

University mission statements talk about impacting the world and learning gain. In a changing political landscape, with advances in AI and increased diversity in the student body the need for us to re-consider (or redefine) how we equip students with the skills they need to be able to fulfil this mission is crucial. This presentation explores our experiences from creating a new level 1 core module that embeds skills teaching through engagement with the politics of global challenges. We will highlight how we connect the topic of global challenges to skills training, surfacing employability skills and fostering a sense of belonging. We show how the assessment is designed to encourage reflection, group work and key academic skills. The overall mission is to show students how to become global agents for change.

The doubling of the numbers of, mainly, young people entering higher education since 1994 in the United Kingdom and the rise in average student debt to £53k has meant an increased spotlight on the value of a university education. Universities are under pressure to articulate the value added or learning gain offered by a degree, especially in tradition-ally non-vocational subjects such as politics or international relations (Moulton, 2023). In addition, with university mission statements expressing a desire for their students to be able 'to make a difference in the world' (University of Leeds, 2025) the expectation that

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universities will ensure students have the range of skills necessary to face the broader challenges confronting the world today is higher than ever (Pownall et al., 2024; Vogel, 2025). With AI capabilities expanding, it has become increasingly important for graduates to bring qualities that technology cannot replicate – like creativity, empathy, and critical thinking.

This paper explores our experiences from creating a new level 1 core 'skills' module. The aim of the module, and hence this article, is to provide students with foundational skills and attributes that will, over the course of their studies, facilitate learning gain. Through engagement with the politics of global challenges we show how we designed a module that both imparted academic skills, and surfaced employability skills, while also fostering a sense of belonging, and encouraging students to think how they could become global agents for change. The article starts by provided some brief background information on the module before reviewing the lessons learnt by the module team by focusing on the core areas of academic skills, belonging and success, employability, and political engagement. In doing so, it adds to a small but growing literature on first-year experience in Politics and IR (see Barr and Jackson, 2018; Blair, 2017). It concludes with an overview of the informal student feedback on the module and our future plans for the module.

Importance of first year transition

The first year at university has always brought a range of new academic and social challenges to students: from possibly living on their own for first time, to getting to grips with a new academic system. In recent years, we have seen a greater focus on the importance of supporting students through this transition on the part of universities in relation to key regulatory agendas around student success and belonging (Briggs et al., 2012; Cameron and Rideout, 2020; Meehan and Howells, 2017). In addition, students are articulating demands for increased academic and personal support, better exposure to a range of opportunities which will help their future careers, and opportunities to engage in social and extra-curricular activities (OfS, 2025). In the United Kingdom, there is a sector wide push on the concept of education/learning gain. According to the 2023 Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) this concept refers to the student's individual educational journey and what they gain from it. As well as knowledge and skills, this includes building confidence, expanding horizons and how they have grown as individuals (Blair and Orr, 2025). Therefore, education gain goes beyond just teaching academic skills.

First year sees students experience a shift from more structured and more certain school/college environment to a less structured, less certain university environment (Strong, 2022: 509–510). Universities must help manage this transition away from this banking of knowledge to a more critical approach (Freire, 1970), as students 'do not automatically become independent learners' and as such 'need support, guidance, and training to develop these skills' (Blair, 2017: 225–226). In a selective university like Leeds, we are balancing two additional challenges. The first is that a significant proportion of our student body is made up of students who have 'mastered pre-university study' (Strong, 2022) and therefore feel that they do not need academic skills and can therefore be unwilling to engage with learning that is explicitly badged as skills or employability training (Moulton, 2023; Tymon, 2011). This is despite evidence suggesting that many of these students lack the independent learning skills for university (e.g. Thompson et al., 2021). The second challenge is the important focus to tackle the awarding gap: the gap being the difference

in 'top degrees' – a First or 2:1 classification – awarded to different groups of students. For both reasons we created a module that went beyond 'just' skills to ensuring all students understood the rules of the game by unpacking the hidden curriculum (see Barham and Wood, 2022). This is crucial: too often in Higher Education there is still a model of learning by osmosis, whereby students are expected to pick up vital skills (from critical reading to class participation) simply by doing it. Linked to this, our academic programmes are not always explicit in surfacing the skills the students achieve, despite Politics/IR programmes providing nearly all the skills and attributes sought by employers such as critical thinking, and problem-solving (Moulton, 2023).

The fact that historically there has been some resistance to the teaching of 'employability' and 'skills' at research-intensive universities has been an additional factor here. By linking skills development to the concept of educational gain we can incorporate skills to a broader definition of success. Finally, a key element in promoting success is encouraging students to create a cohort identity. Ahn and Davis (2020: 631) found that, while the concept of belonging for students is 'multi-dimensional [. . .] social engagement is the most salient factor'. Meehan and Howells (2019: 1382–1383) found that 'students with a strong sense of "connection" with people, the environment and the subject they are learning about are more likely to feel like they belong'.

Key details of our new module

The module in question is a 40-credit year-long 'spine' module compulsory for all students in the school (290 students in 24/25). Each student attends a 2-hour workshop and 1-hour study group weekly, with attendance compulsory for both activities and actively monitored. The teaching delivery of the module (workshop format) was different to that encountered by many students and staff in previous educational environments (and indeed from the lecture/seminar format in their other level 1 modules), with workshops team taught by two staff members facilitating active learning (Alexander et al., 2025; Leston-Bandeira, 2012).

The module content focused on a theme that sits at the heart of the school: the politics of global challenges of the 21st century. We chose four cross-cutting themes (climate change; political engagement, war and conflicts, and structural inequality) that showcased the teaching and research strengths of the school, and linked to the literature that shows that 'skills' modules need to speak to content of a student's programme to be successful (e.g. Elander, 2004). There was a hybrid element in that students were required to do asynchronous preparation: usually watching videos or listening to podcasts (but little formal reading).

The module had three pieces of assessment, utilising an amended assessment criteria. In semester 1, the students submitted two assessments, comprising 50% of the overall mark. The first task focused on educational reflections students wrote in study groups, which focused on their learning experiences from the course activities (workshops and activities) and how they have impacted their understanding. Reflection was used to encourages students to make the link between knowledge and action (Blount, 2006). The reflection sought to increase students' self-awareness and confidence in their strengths: factors that have been shown to increase their sense of belonging (Soria and Stubblefield, 2015). The second task was to create an essay plan for a 2000-word essay. In 1000 words, they had to set out how they would answer a set question showing the main argument, structure, and an annotated bibliography. In doing so we could assess students'

understanding and application of essential academic and research skills. This also allowed us to introduce the school's marking criteria and feedback mechanisms.

In semester 2, the students produced a 2000-word individual reflective log covering academic and wider skills related to a group project students were involved in throughout the semester. This was worth 50% of the final mark. The students were encouraged to reply to specific prompts which focused on justifying the research process they undertook to produce the content and reflecting on the dynamics of the group project from a skills perspective. In both the essay plan and reflective log students were asked to set out how they would act on academic feedback. This was to try and address a key point raised by Robinson et al. (2013: 262) that first year students may have 'over-reliance on the lecturer to aid the feedback process' and so need support to understand the specific nature of university feedback (Blair, 2017).

Academic skills

Delivery of key academic skills and the opportunity to practice these skills is at the heart of the module. The key skills we chose to focus on included self-motivation; finding resources; managing email; knowing what to read and what to ignore, as well as when to stop reading; anxiety about failing; time management; participation in class, note-taking, essay writing and referencing (see QAA, 2023 for a wider list of academic skills developed as part of a Politics/IR degree). These skills are crucial to independent study, what Strong (2022) identified the key focus of university study. Unlike STEM subjects where students are often given structured learning activities at level 1 to ensure they master the skills they need in their discipline in politics/IR this focus on skill development can be implicit at best. Student feedback shows that they want to know how to read and take notes, be taught what questions to ask as they read, and how to access resources (van der Meer, 2011; Wingate et al., 2011). We assume students from Gen Z are tech literate, but it is clear they can lack the 'academic' tech literacy required for university study (Mineshima-Lowe et al., 2024). Therefore, google is given the same weight as google scholar let alone utilising university library databases.

By giving students key tasks in class and checking in with them regarding their sources of information, they were able to identify, practice, and develop the academic skills and capacities needed to research and address them. We were also able to start a conversation about the ethical use of AI in their studies. Students therefore from day one at university began their journey to independent researchers with an understanding of the rules of the academic game.

In the workshops we combined a focus on a specific global challenge with a specific academic skill. For example, we had a session exploring conflict within which we showed students how to reference correctly using the sources discussed in the workshop. In another we linked preparations for a COP simulation with critical thinking. While being mindful of inclusion issues we also gave the students research and discussion tasks where they would research a topic in the workshop, discuss their findings in small groups and then present back to the whole group. A central element of these exercises was for students to identify reliable online resources (see Topal and Shargh, 2023) with the overall aim being to prepare 'students to respond to a changing rather than fixed world' (Carniel et al., 2023: 4, emphasis in the original).

Belonging and success

Given the literature on belonging (see Ahn and Davis, 2020; Smith, 2023; Van Gijn-Grosvenor and Huisman, 2020) the workshop format was utilised to create space for social interaction alongside active learning. Students were given a range of tasks that they needed to work on in teams but with space to also get to know each other. Given the size of our cohort, students often felt that they did not know students on their programme or in the school. A key takeaway for the module team was making students feel explicitly that they are part of the school, both via contact with their peers and the academic staff.

Importantly, students were able to engage with other academic staff from the school and specifically their research usually via a video or podcast. This engagement goes beyond the 'normal' interaction with academic staff at level 1. The delivery model employed at level 1 tends to involve core academic staff delivering lectures and teaching assistants covering the study groups. Asking staff to deliver mini talks based on their research helps induct students into the activities of a research-intensive institution and encounter more staff than previously at level 1. Overall, they encountered four module staff plus 11 other colleagues, which is much higher than the norm at Leeds.

Finally, the module was designed to encourage attendance. Meakin's (2025) work shows that instilling good attendance practices early in university life embed in students and attendance becomes a normal part of student life (see also Strong, 2022). The module tried to ensure attendance in two ways. Workshops activities were designed to be engaging and contemporary, which has been found to promote engagement (Glazier, 2015; Jozwiak, 2015). 'Study groups' were explicitly designed for students to complete the assessment tasks set. Attendance was monitored and supportive emails sent to non-attenders. These emails highlighted that many students were unaware of how to obtain support or notify the university of illness (despite our including such information within the module). This is something we will ensure future versions of the module cover more explicitly. A video from the student support team that can be shared with students and reinforced in the module was one suggestion that offers a possible solution.

Employability skills and global citizenship

The module sought to surface the skills that are crucial in the workplace and encouraged students to become aware of their positionality in the world. Our starting point was that skills valued by employers include the ability to work together to develop solutions which is also critical to global citizenship. By explicitly surfacing skills, the module articulated their learning gain and helps prepare students for an employment market where there are an average of 140 applicants per graduate job (Isherwood, 2024). Key skills such as communication and team working are surfaced through the collaborative active learning elements of the module (Carniel et al., 2023). To reinforce the 'real world' applicability staff from the careers service ran mock assessment centres that allowed students to apply their skills in a different context and surfaced the skills. The second semester workshops continued the collaborative element in academic content but added some specific sessions related to group work, including empathy, active listening, and resilience. Alongside this, students worked in groups to produce an unassessed task (podcast; zine; PowerPoint presentation) focusing on their chosen global challenge and crucially their solutions to tackle the challenge.

The module takes on board Lorenzini's (2013: 417) observation that 'when only presented with knowledge about global challenges, students can become frustrated and overwhelmed unless they also understand how they might contribute to solutions'. The module acknowledges that many students will not have been politically engaged or feel confident in doing so due to the 'banking' of knowledge in formal education (Friere, 1970). The module also provides students with an introduction to the critical thinking skills Wender and D'Erman (2021) liken to a compass in a storm. During the teaching of this module, we saw Trump re-elected as US president, the collapse of the German government, the COP 29, and the continued situation between Palestine/Israel among others. The contemporary political issues workshops were designed to allow us to provide academic-led sessions that allowed students to explore the consequences of these events using the knowledge from other modules, discuss with peers and, where relevant, offer 'solutions'.

What did the students think?

Unsurprisingly, with a new module there were some teething troubles, however the collaborative element of the teaching allowed us as staff to reflect together on how create more stimulating active learning (Alexander et al., 2025). This included making more time for feedback in class, regular breaks and drawing on that day's news or social media posts to hook the students in Le Bourdon (2025). However, here we will focus on the student feedback. The content/skills tension was very apparent. Many students wanted the module to be 20 credits, to give them the space to study another content module. One student said that 'politics was discussed less and less as the year went on'. There was a specific criticism of the wider skills such as empathy and resilience which some students felt were 'filler activities'. This does reflect the design of the module, which had a greater focus in the workshops in semester 2 on skills and this is something we will reflect on for the next academic year. Some students appeared to struggle with moving beyond a didactic model, where they receive and reproduce content, towards a more reflective approach that asks them to consider *how* they learn. To support this shift in future we could better scaffold the transition by starting with familiar content and gradually increasing independence and skill development.

Feedback did suggest, however, that many students appreciated the skills learnt. One specific comment was 'I think I would have been a lot more overwhelmed in first year work without the skills taught here'. Another noted that the module gave 'me an understanding of the essential skills needed for the course'. Students generally liked the interactive nature of workshops. They liked the activities, with emphasis that the more specific the discussion question the easier they find them to engage. They like being able to talk about contemporary issues (such as the US election). They like guest speakers (from the school and more widely). They did not explicitly note a greater sense of belonging with the school, but a number commented about making friends and enjoying the social side of the workshops. A further assessment of this aspect of the module would be useful as they travel through their university experience.

There was some initial resistance to the reflective assessment on the part of students, which was perhaps understandable given that most will not have encountered this type of assessment before. In response to student feedback, we gave them space for practice reflections, provided amended marking criteria, and staff produced examples, which helped to reduce anxiety. The result was some excellent reflective pieces, with a notable

difference in quality between semester 1 and semester 2, showing the growth in their reflective writing skills.

Conclusion

This article has focused on providing an overview of a module that aims to provide students with a range of key foundational skills and attributes that will over the course of their studies facilitate learning gain. This article is not designed to provide a blueprint of how to 'do' critical skills teaching but to provide a starting point of discussion on pedagogical practices that equip our students with lifelong tools to engage with not only their degree but the ever-changing world. Linking all these elements together helps provide the foundation for student education gain. Our example shows that while this aim may be laudable and promoted across the sector there is still a degree of resistance and scepticism among elements of the student body, especially at selective institutions. There is still a legacy of students wanting their learning to be tailored to the assessment and a focus on knowledge and content over skills, belonging activity and other elements we would see as crucial to educational gain. That said, as the student comments show, this module helped many of them navigate the tricky first year both in terms of academic skills but also the key aspect of obtaining a sense of belonging. We also hope the benefits of the module will be seen by students as they progress through their studies. We can track them, and our plan is to do follow up activities with them in future years to see to what extent providing these wider foundations in year one has supported them throughout their degree.

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