

Response to Feedback, 2023-24

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POL3 International Organisation – Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni

The vast majority of responses received were from students who were generally satisfied with the paper, including both the lectures, paper guide and supervisions. Both numeral scores and written comments were overall very positive but some recurrent points of criticism revolved around the large amount of readings assigned, and similarities in content to POL2. This year's version of the POL3 paper guide had a reduced number of required readings compared to previous years but we will continue to monitor the balance between 'required'/'recommended' readings with a view of managing work-loads. POL3 is explicitly designed as a 'follow-on' from POL2, expanding on themes of international cooperation and deepening students' knowledge and understanding of international relations theories which were introduced in more basic form in POL2. POL2 also focuses more on the history of international relations, whereas POL3 explores more contemporary issues of global governance. Each year POL3 introduces novel themes, such as internet governance, environmental cooperation, finance or international law, that are not covered in POL2. Due to the broad nature of both POL2 and POL3, students should be able (and encouraged) to focus their energies on areas that were either not covered in POL2, or that they feel they did not fully explore or grasp during their first year of studying international relations.

POL4 Comparative Politics – Christopher Bickerton

Feedback for POL4 this year continued to be broadly positive for both the Michaelmas and Lent term material, though the number of returns to the feedback survey was low. There were some comments regarding the balance between empirical and theoretical content and some comments relating to the challenges in identifying contemporary topics for themes – such as state-building or democratisation – that seem more historical. In this regard, students are encouraged to focus on both. There are plenty of good empirical discussion of the history of state formation as well as contemporary challenges faced by state-building dynamics today in various parts of the world. The same applies to the emergence and consolidation of democracy.

Comments on supervisions were broadly positive with some very positive remarks for a range of supervisors. POL4 uses a variety of supervisors, including some PhD students, the latter receiving encouraging feedback.

Every effort will be made to upload PowerPoint slides as soon after the lectures as possible as this was raised as an issue regarding the Lent term lectures.

POL4A – Iraq and Syria – Glen Rangwala

The response to this course was encouraging, with almost 90% of the responses reporting satisfaction with the lecture course, and over 90% reporting this with regard to the supervisions. This course though will not return in 2024-25 due to the sabbatical leave of the lecturer, and the intention is to offer a different pair of countries for comparison if it returns in 2025-26. It's been good though to see that the students who took it in its current form enjoyed it.

POL4B – Burundi and Rwanda – Devon Curtis

There were only 7 feedback respondents for the Rwanda-Burundi module in POL 4 but it was encouraging to see that all students were satisfied with all aspects of the module. I was particularly happy that the students found the topics to be relevant and engaging and that they enjoyed the lectures, supervisions and seminar.

POL4C – Poland and Russia- Harald Wydra

I was glad to see that both students had mostly positive things to say about supervisions and comments provided on them. Certainly, the content was appreciated and the feedback also received approval. It is true that sometimes a supervision can become quite dominant and although the best done to bring everybody in to the discussion, there may sometimes be a feeling of unequal attention. I shall give more focus on the writing style, although this is usually also addressed in the Q&A revision session in Easter term.

POL4D – France and Germany – Pieter van Houten

It is good to see that most respondents were satisfied with the module. It seems there was some dissatisfaction among some respondents with the lectures, which will be taken into account next year. It should be pointed out, however, that the purpose of the lectures is to introduce the main themes and provide context to them, not to provide a detailed template for answering essay questions.

POL4E – China and Mongolia – Christian Sorace

Overall, I was quite pleased with the feedback on the module. I found the comment on scheduling quite helpful. For the second supervision in Batch 2 (which stretches both terms), I will make sure to schedule it for the second week of Lent Term, so students do not have to work over the holiday.

POL4F – US and UK - James Wood

Overall, the specific feedback for the UK/US portion of the paper was positive, which I was very pleased to see. The substantive constructive comments about where to improve do not relate to issues brought up previously, which suggests those issues were adequately addressed. That said, the student feedback suggests there are two areas in which the module could be improved:

First, although the students found the essay feedback they received generally helpful, a couple of comments suggest more feedback would have been useful, with two students requesting that feedback be given in-line on the essays themselves. The feedback model I use is informed by pedagogical research and recommended by the University's teaching courses I have taken. However, I will reflect on this and look to provide more feedback on student essays in the coming academic year.

Second, one student mentioned that they had to take the supervision before they were able to attend the lecture on it. This may be due to the popularity of this portion of the paper (which I am very glad about) and the way the POL4 supervisions are arranged (i.e. one group take two supervisions in Michaelmas and another group take one supervision in Michaelmas and the other in Lent). I will look at the scheduling of the supervisions in the coming academic year and see what I can do to avoid this, whilst also adhering to the Department's guidelines about when the POL4 country case supervisions should take place.

POL5/19 Themes and Issues in Politics and International Relations - Giovanni Mantilla

The feedback on POL5/19 was overwhelmingly positive, which was gratifying to see. Students' critical comments for improvement related to various key timings in the running of the paper: 1) when the questions list gets released; 2) when the survey link gets sent out; 3) when the third supervision takes place. Regarding 1), starting in the next academic year, we plan to make available an early (partial) version of the question list in the middle of August so that interested students can start to consider their eventual choices. Unfortunately, however, it is harder to address points 2) and 3) in a satisfying way, albeit for good reasons. The survey link can only be released when all questions have been received, and unfortunately a handful of these only come in at the very end of September. This is because during the summer vacation colleagues generally devote their precious time to research (which they cannot do in term time) and so their availability to deal with teaching matters and responsiveness to email varies highly. The same is true for the winter vacation – which is why the paper does not volunteer academics' vacation time for the organisation of the third supervision. We will continue to think of ways to address these issues – including potentially sending out the survey link early before Lent term. And, we are encouraging all colleagues to organise the first supervision as early as possible in term time so that students can get their research process started early and manage to produce a full draft by the end of term.

POL6 Statistics and Methods in Politics and International Relations – Pieter van Houten

It is pleasing to see that the feedback was generally positive. The structure and the content of the paper will stay the same next year, but an attempt will be made to get the students to focus on the projects earlier in Lent term than was the case last year. Given that there were some comments about the workload in the paper, this will be monitored closely in the coming year. It should be noted, however, that there is considerably less required readings for this paper compared to other papers.

POL7 The History of Political Thought to c.1700 – Chris Brooke

POL7 went through a major restructuring last year as part of the History Faculty's Tripos Reform programme, which finally reached the second-year papers last year. Because POL7 is a collaboration with History (for which it is now paper T1 at Part IB) this inevitably affected us in POLIS / HSPS, too. Insofar as there was negative qualitative feedback, it's reasonable to be optimistic and to think that much of it reflects teething problems as the new paper content and structure settles down, e.g. relating to the new "themes" questions. To some extent, also, a small amount criticism reflects cultural differences between History and POLIS: for example, Politics students are more used to attending lectures with PowerPoint, which isn't used so much by the political thought lecturers in the History Faculty who lecture for POL7, who tend to prefer physical lecture handouts.

POL8/10 The History of Political Thought from c.1700 to c.1890 – Thomas Hopkins

This was the first year of the new syllabus for these papers. Feedback remained very largely positive, particularly for supervisions – the element organised by POLIS. A number of lecturers reported some difficulties in adapting to the reduced number of lectures permitted for the paper under the terms of the History Faculty's Tripos reforms. These problems were reflected in some of the comments in student feedback, which were relayed to colleagues in History. Though it is not possible to add additional lectures into the schedule, the lecturing team has agreed on a number of adjustments that should address the issues raised, including some light revision of some of the primary reading lists for

some of the Section B topics. These teething problems aside, the launch of the new syllabus appears to have been a success.

POL9 Conceptual Issues in Politics and International Relations – Ayse Zarakol

The student response has been noted. We agree with the few students who provided feedback that 8 hours for POL9 is excessive. This academic year the POL9 seminars have been cut down to 6 hours, and we have plans to cut them down further in the coming academic years.

POL11 Political Philosophy and the History of Political Thought since c.1890 – Duncan Kelly

From a relatively small sample size of responses, some mixed feedback across a wide range, from the polemical and personal, to the structural and constructive. It was gratifying to see several people enjoying numerous lectures, and finding supervisions helpful and engaging, though disappointing that some of the feedback notes (a) timetabling confusion, (b) unhappiness and uncertainty about the purpose of the paper and its reading lists and the style of some lecturers, in part because (c) what is asked for is a stricter connection between lectures and paper topics throughout. There has been a lot of collective thinking about how to revise this paper over several years between History and Politics (this is a jointly provided paper). This has now been undertaken, and there should soon be a closer approximation between lectures and paper topics across the whole of the paper.

POL12 The Politics of the Middle East – Glen Rangwala

The ratings and comments on this course were extremely good, and students who responded to the survey gave encouraging feedback to the supervisors. It was also good to see that one standard comment that this course has received in the past - that the reading lists are too long - didn't appear this year, after there was more of an effort to trim these down prior to the start of the academic year. This course will not be running in 2024-25 due to sabbatical leave arrangements, and if it comes back in 2025-26, there will probably be quite an extensive redesign - but the positive comments in the feedback will be kept in mind to ensure that a redesigned course doesn't lose the benefits of its predecessor.

POL13 British and European Politics – Julie Smith, Peter Sloman

We are grateful for the students thoughtful feedback. In particular, we are aware that those students covering EU and UK politics have to cover a lot of ground. In practice, students who have opted to do this tend to do well on the paper, but we will endeavour to make even more explicit what the expectations are in terms of reading and of breadth versus depth.

For 2024-25 there will in any case be a change as the EU module is not running owing to sabbatical leave. Thus, the British Politics lectures will be spread across MT and LT, reducing the condensed nature of that part of the course. In terms of coverage of material within supervisions, one of the historical supervision topics (1945-64) will be split into two supervisions to make it more manageable. Finally, the course leaders will make an extra effort to highlight the most important readings, and to clarify that students aren't expected to read everything on the reading list.

POL14 International Security – Steven Ward

Student feedback for POL 14 was overwhelmingly positive this year. 5 out of 8 respondents report being very satisfied with the content of the paper; 7 out of 8 were very satisfied with the lectures; and 6 out of 8 were very satisfied with the paper guide and reading list. No students reported being very dissatisfied, and only one student reported being somewhat dissatisfied with the content of the paper. There were two negative comments about the paper as a whole. The first of these complains about having “no guidance going into the Easter holiday which is the key time for revising.” This seems primarily to be a complaint about the absence of any previous exams to aid revision, which is unavoidable for a brand new paper. I will note, though, that it is not true that students had “no guidance” about the exam – the exam’s format was clearly described in the paper guide, and there was a mock exam included at the end of the paper guide. This year there will be, in addition, one previous year’s exam for students to use to revise. The second negative comment notes that “lectures were vague at times.” This very vague comment is impossible to address without more information about which lectures the student did not like, and why – and, in any event, the next comment notes that “lectures were all well presented and very engaging” (and the overwhelming majority of respondents – 7 out of 8 – reported maximum satisfaction with the lectures).

POL15 The Politics of Africa – Sharath Srinivasan

The overall feedback for POL15 was very positive, however there were some valuable reflections and recommendations. There is a desire for more case studies, and this has proven challenging to incorporate in the new structure. More case study content has been made available on Moodle, and reading lists have also been revised to highlight case studies. Nevertheless, we will continue to consider options to rebalance towards case examples in the future.

POL16 The Politics of Global China – Christian Sorace

The feedback on the paper was very positive. In response to the particular suggestion to display the names of Chinese authors/historical figures, I will include more spelling in my PowerPoints and use the whiteboard more frequently.

POL17 Politics and Gender – Lauren Wilcox

It is difficult to respond to feedback as we received very little (7 respondents from around 30 registered students) and we would encourage more students to fill out their feedback in the future so we can better assess how we are meeting their needs. Overall, the feedback was very positive and above department averages. Students that responded were pleased they could sign up for different supervisors based on their interests and also with supervisors who were lecturing on different themes in the course. Respondents were also positive about the option to do a presentation rather than an essay for one supervision a term. There was only one mixed comment who praised the lectures and the course organization in general but felt there was too much emphasis on abstract theories. I will mention this to lecturers in the future, but also note that lecturers often use the lectures to explain trickier theoretical issues that appear in the readings in order to provide background to help the students build on readings and key concepts for their essays on exams. Another comment about a desire for more British feminism is noted although the course maintains an international perspective.

POL18 The Politics of the International Economy – Helen Thompson

As part of the annual review of feedback and discussions among the lecturers, there will be some changes to the paper for this coming academic year. In particular, there will be additional lectures on

global south topics and some reorganisation of the lectures on energy and resource extraction in general. Since there will now be 32 lectures for the paper, there will no longer be classes. The new list of lectures can be found here over the first two pages:

https://www.polis.cam.ac.uk/files/pol18_paper_guide_2024-25.pdf

POL20 The Politics of Latin America – Carsten-Andreas Schulz

POL20 'Latin American Politics' is a new course, that was offered for the first time in the 2023-2024 academic year. The feedback shows that students were generally satisfied with the course, although with only four respondents, the results are of limited utility. One respondent suggested that the lectures on political economy were interesting but would benefit from a more slow-paced introduction to the topic, especially for students without sufficient prior knowledge. In response, the course structure has been revised, and more introductory material has been added to the political economy section. Respondents also noted the lack of a past exam paper, which will not be an issue next academic year. It is also worth pointing out that students performed very well in the exam, and in particular in the political economy section; scripts were generally rich, detailed, and showing both theoretical depth and empirical breadth.

POL21 Politics of the Future – Duncan Bell

In response to feedback, I have made two changes to Pol 21: (1) I have changed the relationship between the regular supervising essay topics and the Long Essay topics, allowing students to either choose from the set list of questions (as before) or to come up with a question in consultation with their supervisor that is closely aligned with the subject of their Long Essay; and (2) I have changed the seminar format, meaning that all students will attend the same 4 seminars, rather than the class being divided into two groups for the seminars.

POL22 Politics and Public Policy – Margarita Gelepithis

Many thanks to the nine out of thirty-three students who took the time to provide feedback for POL22 this year. Responses indicate that students were generally satisfied with the paper. Looking ahead, there is some scope to even out the supervisory experience, and to further clarify the links between Michaelmas and Lent term content.