

Politics and International Relations

Guide to Dissertations 2025-26

Summary of deadlines

Title: 15th October 2025

Ethical approval (if required): 4 July 2025 or 24 October 2025

Title revision: 19th February 2026

Submission: 30th April 2026

Choosing a dissertation, a topic and a supervisor

If you wish to offer a dissertation in Part IIB, you are expected to start work on it over the summer. To be able to do that, you need to decide on a topic in the preceding Easter term

As with a long essay for assessment, a dissertation topic for the Tripos does not have to be original, but it should go beyond anything to which you can easily find answers in the standard literature. It should in large part consist of your own material, and your own arguments. ‘Your own material’ can be facts that are new. Or, more usually, it can be facts which, although known, have been scattered across a range of sources, and not previously brought together, or at least, not brought together in the way that you will have done. ‘Your own arguments’ can likewise be new. Or they can be arguments which have not previously been put, pressed, connected or supported in the ways that you will do.

You also need to find a supervisor in the preceding Easter term, you cannot write a dissertation without a supervisor. You should remember that you will not be able to find a supervisor for all conceivable topics in the field of politics and international relations. The Department has a list of its staff, together with a brief account of their

research interests, at: [University Teaching Officers \(UTO\) and Fixed-Term Lecturers \(FTL\) | Department of Politics and International Studies \(POLIS\)](#)

There are academics in other university departments who have a lot of experience in supervising dissertations in Politics and International Relations, and so this is not necessarily discouraged. Do be aware, however, that dissertations in other Triposes often have quite different requirements and expectations to those in Politics & International Relations, and so some measure of caution is needed. Supervisors for dissertations cannot be graduate students either from inside or outside the department.

It is the responsibility of your Director of Studies to approve a supervisor for you. You may also ask your Director of Studies to approach someone in particular. It is often helpful to send your Director of Studies a short, perhaps half-page, summary of what you would like to your dissertation to be about which they can send to a potential supervisor. If you approach a potential supervisor directly, you should keep your Director of Studies informed.

Your eventual choice of supervisor will need to be confirmed by the Department before you can be registered for the dissertation; in most cases, such as those involving supervision by staff members, this will be straightforward. But if you have doubts, please ask your Director of Studies to contact the Dissertation Coordinator. The dissertation coordinator for 2025-2026 is Professor Helen Thompson (het20@cam.ac.uk).

The application form and ethical approval for research

You do not have formally to decide to submit a dissertation for Part IIB until the beginning of the Michaelmas Term in your third year. The deadline to receive dissertation titles is **Wednesday 15th October 2025**. Your Director of Studies must sign the dissertation form.

You have the opportunity to change your dissertation title up to Lent term, as the focus of the work develops over the course of the first part of the year. It is not advisable to submit a formal request for a change of title every time your focus shifts. Instead, use the deadline for title changes as a point at which you can reflect with your supervisor upon what exactly the dissertation can aspire to do. It is advisable that your title be a topic, not a question. The deadline for title changes is **12 noon on Thursday 19th February 2026**. By this date, send your formal request for a change of title to the Undergraduate Secretary on ugradadmin@polis.cam.ac.uk.

There is a formal process for seeking **ethical approval** for research for dissertations from the POLIS Ethics, Risk, and Fieldwork Committee. Ethical approval is not required for many dissertations in Politics and International Relations, but ethical approval is required for dissertations involving research participants, for example interviews, or using protected data. The department's policy is that undergraduate students are only allowed to work with non-vulnerable adult participants in their dissertation research.

Guidance on whether you need ethical approval can be found here:

[Ethics | Department of Politics and International Studies \(POLIS\)](#)

If such approval is needed, there are two deadlines for you to consider. To undertake research over the summer, you will need to make an application by **4 July 2025**. The second deadline for research to be done during the academic year of your dissertation is **24 October 2025**.

The forms can be found here under *submitting the application*
[Undergraduates | Department of Politics and International Studies \(POLIS\)](#)

The forms should be sent to ugradadmin@polis.ac.uk.

Supervisions

You can expect six supervisions during your final year on the dissertation. Supervisors can suggest texts but you are also expected to go well beyond the texts recommended to you by your supervisor: often this will require you to conduct searches through bibliographic databases such as jstor.org and the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences.

A suggested timetable would be:

- Summer vacation: read and conduct research if necessary to prepare for the first supervision

To write a dissertation, *you need to choose a question*. This should be one that you can actually answer, or at least, a question that allows you to go some way towards explaining what an answer might and might not be.

You do not need to have worked out your question during the preceding Easter term but you do need to start thinking about one over the summer.

- Michaelmas term: three supervisions with the aim of agreeing the question at the first, a chapter structure at the second, and having a draft introductory chapter for the third.
- Winter vacation: draft several chapters
- Lent term: three supervisions with the first covering the draft chapters completed over the vacation, the second a full first-draft, and the third a second draft.
- Easter vacation: complete substantive editing from the second draft and work on the presentation of the dissertation including referencing and proof reading.

Please be aware that supervisors will not be able to read drafts during vacations.

Dissertation workshops

There will be three dissertation workshops to discuss general issues in dissertation writing. They will be run by Helen Thompson, **date, time and location tbc.**

The first workshop will discuss research questions and how to situate those questions in relevant bodies of literature. The second workshop will discuss writing, including chapter structure. The third workshop will be an open session.

Word limit

The word limit is 10,000 words for Dissertations. There is no leeway. Students exceeding the word limit will be penalised. The word limit must be written on the coversheet for your dissertation at submission and the Department will carry out checks. At the final Examiners' meeting in June, the Examiners will discuss all cases of over-length work and agree a penalty scale.

The word limit includes all text except the bibliography; this means that the main text, all data in tables or figures, appendices, captions, the table of contents, footnotes, endnotes, the front page including the title and all prefatory material at the start of the dissertation will be counted. As a general rule, any content that the Examiners must read in order to assess your work should be included in the main body and not in an appendix; overuse of appendices or footnotes may be penalised if it impairs the understanding of your work.

Dissertations that fall under 6,000 words will also be penalised.

Layout

Dissertations must be word-processed, use double line-spacing, have a font size of 11 or 12, have right and left margins of at least 2.5 cm, include page numbers and a bibliography, and provide references for all quotations.

For a dissertation, it is often useful to have sections or chapters. If you do use them, it may then be helpful to have a contents page at the front. If you use a considerable

number of specialist acronyms, abbreviations or non-English terms, a list of these at the start may also be helpful. It's worth repeating that these items are all included in the word count, as is everything except the bibliography.

You should **NOT** include your name or college anywhere on your dissertation. The department will supply a coversheet for completion which will include a declaration on plagiarism (see section below) - only one is needed per submission.

References and bibliographies

There are two common conventions for references: **(1)** full references in notes at the foot of the page or the end of the document, with a bibliography at the end of the work; or **(2)** 'author-date' citations in the text, with a bibliography at the end of the work. Follow just one of these, and in whichever you use, make sure that your referencing is complete and consistent. For further guidance on plagiarism see pp. 14-17.

1. The full referencing convention. If using this approach, references are included in the notes, which should be numbered serially from 1 from the start of the dissertation. For references in notes, give full details at the first mention in the chapter, and at subsequent mentions in the dissertation, a brief citation will do. Notwithstanding their widespread use, avoid op. cit., loc. cit., and ibid.; these can confuse. The bibliography should include the full references in alphabetical order.

Examples:

For books –

Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, p.36.

Thereafter: *Putnam, Making Democracy Work*, pp 12-13.

For journals –

Sidney Tarrow, 'Making social science work across space and time: a critical reflection on Putnam's "Making Democracy Work"', *American Political Science Review* 90 (1996), pp.389-98.

Thereafter: Tarrow, 'Making social science work', pp.389-98.

For chapters in edited volumes –

Maud Eduards 'Sweden', in Joni Lovenduski and Jill Hills (eds), *The Politics of the Second Electorate: Women and Public Participation*, Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, pp.208-27.

Thereafter: Eduards, 'Sweden', pp. 208-27.

For corporate authors –

Economist, 'Between the Caudillo and the Democrat', 17 April 1999, pp.39-40.

Thereafter: *Economist*, 'Between the Caudillo and the Democrat', pp.39-40.

For edited and/or translated volumes –

Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the uses and disadvantages of history for life', in *Untimely Meditations*, edited by Daniel Breazeale, translated by R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997 [1874], pp.57-123.

Thereafter: Nietzsche, 'On the uses and disadvantages', pp.57-123.

For internet links –

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (DNB), 'Keynes, John Maynard', Sept 2004, www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/34310, accessed 26 July 2013.

Thereafter: Oxford DNB, 'Keynes, John Maynard'.

2. The author-date system. Footnotes and endnotes, including the references in such notes, count towards the total number of words in long essays and dissertations in Politics and International Relations; references in a bibliography at the end of the work do not. For this reason, you may prefer to adopt the second convention - the 'author-date' or 'Harvard' style. In this, references are included in the text or the notes. There should then be a complete list of references at the end of the dissertation, in which the items should be arranged alphabetically by author's surname (or where there is no author listed, by corporate author).

Examples:

For books -

In text: ... elite political culture in Italy changed dramatically over the course of the 1970s (Putnam 1993: 33) ...

or: Putnam (1993:33) argues that elite political culture in Italy changed dramatically over the course of the 1970s...

In bibliography:

Putnam, R. D. 1993. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

For journals –

In text: ... although others have questioned his measurements of institutional performance (e.g., Tarrow 1996: 389-98) ...

or: Tarrow (1996: 389-98) is critical of the measurements of institutional performance that are used...

In bibliography:

Tarrow, S. 1996. Making social science work across space and time: A critical reflection on Putnam's 'Making democracy work'. *American Political Science Review* 90: 389-98.

For chapters in edited volumes –

In text: ... whereas in Sweden, female parliamentarians had a significant role in raising the profile of distinctively women's issues in debates about legislation (Eduards 1981) ...

In bibliography:

Eduards, M. 1981. Sweden. In Joni Lovenduski and Jill Hills (eds) *The Politics of the Second Electorate: Women and Public Participation*. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

For corporate authors - In text:

(Economist 1999: 39-40)

In bibliography: *Economist*. 1999. Between the Caudillo and the Democrat. 17 April, 39-40.

For edited and/or translated volumes -

In text: (Nietzsche 1994: 176-86)

In bibliography: Nietzsche, F. 1994. The Greek State. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. K. Ansell-Pearson, trans. C. Diethe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 176-86

For internet links –

In text: (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography 2004)

In bibliography:

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. 2004. Keynes, John Maynard, www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/34310

With the full referencing system (1), it may be useful to have separate lists of primary (archival and unpublished texts, interviews) and secondary (including those on the web, which are counted as ‘publications’) sources in the bibliography. With the author-date system (2), a single bibliography is usually to be preferred. It is never advisable to divide bibliographies between types of secondary sources (eg separate list of books, articles, items on the web etc.). With both systems, bibliographies should only include items cited in the main text.

Submission and Penalties that may be imposed

Dissertations must be submitted by **12 noon on Thursday 30th April 2026**. Submission takes place electronically, via a Moodle page with a Turnitin plagiarism detection function. A completed cover sheet will also be submitted as a separate document to ensure that the dissertation itself remains anonymous. You will be enrolled on the Moodle page and provided with information before the start of Easter Term. If you have any questions, please ask the Undergraduate admin team on ugradadmin@polis.cam.ac.uk. **Dissertations must be received by 12.00 noon in order for the work to be considered as submitted.**

Penalties for Late Submission:

- (a) 1 point per hour or part thereof - up to 3 points (1 point per the first hour, another point for the second hour, and the third point for any further delay up to 12 noon the next day)
- (b) Next 10 days or part thereof - 3 points per day
- (c) Any work submitted after 10 days is marked 0
- (d) Electronic submission is mandatory
- (e) Handing-in times are standardised as 12 NOON on the due date (this applies also to deadline extensions), with penalties applied every 24 hours from the due time

If you have good reason to request an extension (e.g., serious health problem, major family difficulty), you should contact your College as soon as possible, as all requests must go through the University's Examination Access and Mitigation Committee [About the EAMC | Cambridge students](#). All requests must be accompanied by appropriate evidence. You should also ensure that you allow appropriate time to format and present your work before the deadline. Problems with computers or printing facilities will not be accepted as reasons for late submission. A completed cover sheet must be submitted online, and will be supplied before the submission.

Concerns about plagiarism are taken very seriously and students should ensure that they are familiar with the Department's guidance (see section on Plagiarism below). Cases of suspected unfair practice will be investigated by the Senior Examiner on a case-by-case basis; this investigatory meeting may involve your examiners, supervisor, College Tutor(s) and the University Proctors. Following the investigatory meeting, the Chair may recommend that penalties be applied to the final mark. All penalties to be applied will be agreed at the final Examiners' meeting. Students should read the University's Guidance on Plagiarism at [Definition of academic misconduct | Plagiarism and Academic Misconduct](#)

Marking criteria for dissertations for 2025-26

80 +

Identifies a clear question and states its importance cogently; shows a very clear understanding of a wide range of material relevant to that question; develops an original argument based on research or theoretical innovation or synthesis that is very well supported by evidence and/or texts, displaying a very high degree of insight; impeccable accuracy; faultlessly written and presented, and meticulously referenced. To fall into this range, a dissertation has to display all of these qualities.

70-79

Identifies a clear question; shows a very good understanding of a wide range of material relevant to that question; develops an intelligent and persuasive argument based on research or theoretical innovation or synthesis that is well supported by evidence and/or texts, displaying clear indications of insight and/or originality; a high level of accuracy; well written and presented and meticulous referenced. To fall into this range, a dissertation has to display all of these qualities.

60-69

Identifies a clear question; shows a good understanding of a wide range of material relevant to that question; develops a clear argument that is generally based on research, or theoretical analysis or synthesis and supported by evidence and/or texts; a good level of accuracy; well written and presented; well referenced. To fall

into this range, a dissertation has to display all of these qualities and should not show decisively any of the weaknesses listed under the criteria for a lower second. Dissertations where there is some evidence of the negative qualities listed under the criteria for 50-59 will receive a mark between 60 and 64.

50-59

Identifies a question and generally pursues it through the dissertation but is weak in at least one of the following respects: clarity of the question posed; degree of understanding of relevant material; coherence of the overall argument or the absence of one; accuracy; the support of the evidence and/or texts for the conclusions drawn; writing, presentation and bibliographical material. To fall into this range, a dissertation has to display both positive qualities. Dissertations that are in whole or in part not well written or presented will receive a mark in this range regardless of their positive qualities.

40-49

A clear subject and some attempt to develop a piece of work over the length of the dissertation but either lacking a question or extremely weak in at least one of the following other respects: degree of understanding of relevant material; coherence of the overall argument or the absence of one; accuracy; the support of the evidence and/or texts for the conclusions drawn; writing, presentation and bibliographical material for a significant part of the essay. To fall into this range, a dissertation has to display both positive qualities.

21-39

A stated subject for study and a discernible attempt to offer a discussion of that subject over the length of the dissertation but either a dissertation that is poorly written, or poorly structured for the length of the dissertation, or makes a large number of mistakes of fact, or demonstrates acute failures of understanding.

1-20

A dissertation that either shows a complete failure of understanding of the subject, or that is radically incomplete.

0

No dissertation submitted, or a dissertation submitted more than ten days after the deadline.

Note If the dissertation contains a significant number of typographical errors, has many grammatical errors, or does not have a proper system of referencing and a bibliography, it will not ordinarily receive a higher class than a 2.2. This process of proof reading takes time and requires a clear mind.

Prizes

The Department awards an annual John Dunn Prize for the best dissertation in Politics and International Relations. This dissertation may also be entered for the cross-faculty Gladstone Prize.

Plagiarism¹

Plagiarism is presenting, as your own, words and thoughts that are not your own. Plagiarism is a form of cheating and regarded as such by the University's Ordinances. At the beginning of each academic year you must sign a form saying that you have read the Faculty's document on the matter and fully understand what plagiarism is. If you are in any doubt, ask your Director of Studies to talk you through the issue.

Below, three different forms of plagiarism are explained. Most students will be aware that the first two are wrongful. The third form, involving copying text that is otherwise referenced from a book or article, still generates confusion in some students, and therefore it is important to read this section, even if you are confident that you know what plagiarism is.

What Constitutes Plagiarism

1. Copying text from unpublished sources. Submitting work that has been obtained in whole or in part from Internet sites or from other students is plagiarism. There are no grey lines. This always constitutes a deliberate attempt to deceive and shows a wilful disregard for the point of a university education. Each piece of work

¹ This section draws upon Faculty and University guidance on plagiarism. Students should ensure that they read and understand the HSPS Faculty Guidance at <https://www.hspc.cam.ac.uk/examination-and-assessment> and the University- wide statement on plagiarism: <https://www.plagiarism.admin.cam.ac.uk/>

is expected to be the original, independent work of the student, and so if this is not the case it must be declared in the dissertation.

Proofreading, reading drafts, and suggesting general improvements to other students' work, and receiving such help from others, is not collusion, and is often helpful. However, if for example another student carried out detailed redrafting of the entire conclusion of a dissertation, this would be considered collusion. If this is not acknowledged in the dissertation, it is considered a form of plagiarism. Reproducing the thoughts of lecturers and the advice from a supervisor is not regarded as plagiarism. Merely reproducing lecture notes, however, is always obvious and takes away the purpose of writing your own work.

2. Copying from published literature without acknowledgement. This applies, without distinction, to material from the internet and from printed sources. Work that is drawn upon in your dissertations must be referenced appropriately. If you quote from a source, or draw from a particular section of a text, you should reference the relevant page numbers. Avoiding plagiarism means getting into the habit of careful referencing.

3. Copying text without using quotation marks. This is a form of plagiarism even if you acknowledge the source of the text. That is, if you are including text that is not in quotation marks, you are asserting that you have written these words yourself; if this is not so, it is passing off someone else's words as your own.

This is the most common form of plagiarism found in this university, and so requires a few more words of explanation. Take the following passage from the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB):

'For two years from the autumn of 1941 Keynes was mainly occupied with proposals for the post-war international monetary system. In the immediate post-war years the existing system of exchange controls and bilateral payments agreements would have to continue, but in the long term these arrangements should be superseded by a multilateral scheme with currencies freely convertible. Keynes prepared a plan for an international clearing union to supersede the gold standard and put forward a set of rules for balance of payments adjustment that required

creditor countries to take the main initiative. His plan underwent many revisions before being submitted to the Americans, who had prepared a plan of their own—the White plan—for a stabilization fund and (in the initial version) an international bank for reconstruction and development.’

If you quote from any part of this, you must put it in quotation marks and attribute it as: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/34310 If you paraphrase any part, you must reference it in the same way.

To write something like what follows is plagiarism:

‘From 1941 to 1943 Keynes was mainly occupied with proposals for the post-war international monetary system (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography 2004). Immediately after the Second World War, the existing system of exchange controls and bilateral payments agreements by necessity had to endure, but ultimately these arrangements would be superseded by a multilateral scheme with currencies freely convertible. The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (2004) relates how Keynes’ plan underwent many revisions before being given to Washington, where White had devised his own plan for a stabilization fund and in the initial version an international bank for reconstruction and development.’

In this text, there are five phrases that are repeated word-for-word from the original source, or with only tiny amendments: ‘Keynes was mainly occupied...’, ‘the existing system of exchange controls and bilateral payments agreements’, ‘superseded by a multilateral scheme...’, ‘underwent many revisions before’, and ‘for a stabilization fund and in the initial version...’. Even though the ODNB is referred to twice in the text, these words are not in quotation marks, and therefore this would constitute plagiarism. One could put each of these phrases in quotation marks, but of course much better would be to put the text in your own words.

This form of plagiarism may sometimes occur due to poor note-taking. If you are reading a book or article and taking notes on paper or on your computer, you may sometimes find yourself copying out apt sentences or paragraphs mechanically. When it comes to turning your reading into a piece of work for submission, students

may in a hurry string their notes together. The result is an unintentional, but serious, form of plagiarism. It is important to guard against this, and to develop a way to distinguish in your own notes the legitimate paraphrase from the quotation, for example by including quotation marks in your own notes or by highlighting such text.

This form of plagiarism is often from texts that have technical language, and students may take someone else's words because they are unsure of their precise meaning. In the hypothetical example above, students who are not quite sure what exactly is meant by 'the existing system of exchange controls and bilateral payments agreements' in the ODNB entry may be tempted just to copy the entire clause. With language in it that continues to mystify, it is worthwhile to read around the topic, to make an effort to put it into your own words, and to use a supervisor to discuss the terms themselves until you are satisfied that your understanding is solid.

Use of originality checking software

The University subscribes to a service named 'Turnitin' that provides an electronic means of checking student work against a very large database of material from the internet, published sources and other student essays. This service also helps to protect the work submitted by students from future plagiarism and thereby maintain the integrity of any qualifications you are awarded by the University. The copyright of the material remains entirely with the author, and no personal data will be uploaded with the work.

Any examiner who finds evidence of plagiarism in a dissertation will contact the Chair of Examiners, who will liaise with the University Proctors. This will lead to an investigative meeting. If the Senior Proctor believes that there is a case to answer, s/he will then inform the University Advocate who can take the student before the University's Court of Discipline. The Court of Discipline has the power to deprive any student found guilty of plagiarism of membership of the University and to strip them of any degrees awarded by it. A case may be made irrespective of the student's intent to deceive.