

## **Response to Feedback, 2021-22**

### **Department of Politics and International Studies**

#### **POL1: The Modern State and its Alternatives**

The issues that were raised by the feedback exercise were primarily about the supervision experience. A few students clearly experienced some delay in receiving feedback from supervisors on their essays. The paper organiser will write to all supervisors at the beginning of this academic year to remind them that they are expected to provide written feedback at the supervision itself.

#### **POL2: Conflict, Order, and Justice**

While the overall feedback for POL2 was positive, only a small proportion of students (fewer than 10%) completed the paper evaluation, making it impossible to tell if the responses received were representative of general student sentiments. The paper will be substantially overhauled and the reading list completely changed in 2022-23, and we look forward to a full return to in-person teaching. In line with student feedback, some of the material on the field of International Relations previously covered in lectures in Lent term will be brought forward to Michaelmas. In line with student concerns about workload and exams, the number of questions to be answered in the exam will be reduced from three to two. Supervisions for the paper are the responsibility of the colleges rather than POLIS, but the feedback was largely positive on supervisions; where constructive criticisms were made, these have been passed on.

#### **POL3: International Organisation**

While students who chose to provide feedback displayed a generally high level of satisfaction with the course guide, lectures and supervisions, some expressed concerns about the added value of the streams. Based on feedback from the last few years, we have chosen to discontinue the streams and instead cover a wider range of topics in the main lectures (which have correspondingly increased in number).

#### **POL4: Comparative Politics**

##### General:

The response to POL4 was generally positive, both in terms of the individual modules offered and the general section taught in Lent term. One of the principal themes of the comments was directed towards the impact of industrial action on the lectures given in Lent term 2022, which is not really a matter that can be responded to in the way that one responds to other sorts of feedback. On the course itself, there was some commentary on the breadth and range of the course and the challenge this poses for fitting it all into the model of two supervisions per term. Some thought will be given to this, as well as to the organization of the course guide so that readings may be clustered around lecture topics rather than supervision questions as at present. There seemed to be no real consensus around having modules first or second, and this reflects a common pattern that views on this are divided but with many students agnostic on the matter. Modules will continue to be run in Michaelmas term and the general lectures given in Lent. Comments about specific readings/themes and ways of

updating them are gratefully received and will be taken into account in future versions of the course.

#### Middle East module:

The response to the course on Iran and Saudi Arabia was generally good, with 17/24 responses as 'very satisfied' for the lectures and 15/24 as 'very satisfied' for the paper content. That said, many of the core themes with which this pairing of two countries began a few years ago in POL4 have faded in relevance, leaving the course without the focus that brings out the sharpest sorts of analysis. This is illustrated in the tone of much of the feedback, which is positive but not enthusiastic. As a result, next year, the option will switch to a different pairing of countries (Iraq and Syria), with a new set of thematic approaches, to give a better sense of key contemporary issues in Middle Eastern politics.

#### Africa module:

The feedback for the Rwanda-Burundi module in POL4 was encouraging. All students were either 'very' or 'somewhat' satisfied with the content, lectures, paper guide and reading list and supervisions. It was disappointing, however, that only 6 out of 50 students provided feedback and we only received one comment, which was a positive comment about one of the supervisors. The Africa module for POL4 will change next year, but we were pleased to see that students are interested in the politics of this part of the world.

#### Eastern Europe module:

It was good to see that most of the students were quite satisfied with both the lectures and the delivery of supervisions. Criticism regarding written feedback has been passed on to the supervisors and new supervisors on this paper will be instructed accordingly.

#### Western Europe module:

There were relatively few feedback responses, but most of the scores provided were encouraging. There was an issue with supervisions in Lent Term for some students (in some cases because students did not respond to any emails about supervisions in Michaelmas Term and early in Lent Term) and some essays were marked very late. This was the module leader's fault and should be avoided next year.

#### Latin America module:

12 students (out of 58 enrolled) responded to the questionnaire. Feedback was consistently positive across all aspects with upwards of 80% satisfaction rates for most questions, including 100% satisfaction with feedback on supervision work (75% very satisfied) and 92% very satisfied with the organisation of supervisions. No student was very dissatisfied with any aspect of the module, and there were very few somewhat dissatisfied answers (4 out of 72 individual answers, 5.6%). One aspect that will be addressed in later iterations of this module is that a student indicated that it covered too much material, in line with other POL4 modules. This a common challenge in Comparative Politics, for which students need to become acquainted with theoretical material as well as the basic political and historical aspects of a (presumably unfamiliar) region of the world. Attempts will be made to streamline the module where possible, whilst noting the underlying challenge this poses.

### South-East Asia module:

It was very pleasing to see that the remodelled POL4 module on Burma/Myanmar and Siam/Thailand, now more sharply focused on the politics of legitimation, received very positive student feedback. All survey respondents indicated that they were either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with both the overall quality of the module and the supervisions. The written comments from the students did not mention any areas for improvement. Nevertheless, improvements will be made for next year's iteration of the module. Specifically, the paper guide and reading list will be revised and updated.

### US-UK module:

The feedback was generally all very positive, which very good to see. The only concern clearly raised by one student was that they were somewhat dissatisfied with the reading list on the paper guide, but no comments were provided. The paper guide will be reviewed to make sure that the readings are suitable for the level of study and that they are readily available on iDiscover.

### **POL5 and POL19: Themes and Issues in Politics and International Relations**

A great deal of student satisfaction is recorded for these papers, which is very good to see, with only two students reporting dissatisfaction with the choice of essay titles, two with the organisation of supervisions, and three with the feedback provided by supervisors. There is praise for particular supervisors (and some constructively critical remarks); the only critical qualitative comment was that group sessions for the first supervision did not go so well, and there was a suggestion that more should be done to make sure all supervisors were familiar with the marking criteria.

For 2022-23 we have slightly fewer questions than the record 99 that we had in 2021-22, but still many more than in any previous year, and they cover a gratifyingly wide range of topics in Politics and International Relations.

### **POL6: Statistics and Methods in Politics and International Relations**

Although the number of responses was quite low (given there were 45 students in the paper), it is good to see that the feedback was generally positive. Related to the projects, there were some comments that some students found it hard to get going on it and that group projects may be easier. However, it is not easy to see how groups projects could be used as part of the assessment for the paper. As for starting the project, the plan is to try to be more structured about this next year and make sure that students and supervisors focus on this early enough in Lent term. It is also crucial for this that students have kept up with the work in the first part of the course (so that they are in a position to start their project work then). For the practical sessions, 'demonstration recordings' were posted after the sessions, so it was then possible to use the sessions to let students do work themselves (rather than spending large chunks of it on demonstrating things, as was the case in the past). It is hoped to use some of such online resources again next year.

### **POL7: The History of Political Thought, before c. 1700**

With only seven students responding to the survey it is on the one hand hard to draw too many conclusions but on the other hand gratifying to see that none of them reported dissatisfaction with any part of the course.

POL7 this coming year will be very similar to how it has been in recent years. The big change will come next year when the History Faculty's long-planned programme of Tripos Reform hits the second-year Part IB course, so it will be very interesting to see how students react to that, in two years' time.

### **POL8/10: The History of Political Thought, c. 1700 – c. 1890**

Feedback for POL8/10 was a little mixed this year by comparison with previous years. While a clear majority of respondents reported themselves somewhere between satisfied and very satisfied with the content and delivery of the paper, this was counterbalanced by some sharply negative responses. Some of the complaints related to the organisation of lectures and length of the reading lists, both ongoing issues that have been fed back by the department to the History Faculty. Even under the new dispensation coming into effect with the History Tripos reforms (for second-year papers such as POL8, these will come into force in 2023-4), the structure of the lecture course (roughly chronological, but with adjustments where necessary to take into account staff on academic leave) is unlikely to change. It remains the best fit for the teaching of the course across no fewer than four Triposes. On reading lists, it is for supervisors to give additional direction as appropriate, and where this is given as expected, the volume of reading is entirely comparable with other HSPS papers.

As regards content, the chief complaint concerned the Western-focused nature of the paper. Like POL7, POL8/10 is intended to give students an in-depth introduction to texts and debates that have had a profound formative influence on the development of the disciplines of political science and political theory. In studying twentieth-century and contemporary political theory (the subject-matter of POL11, and addressed in a number of settings across a range of third-year papers), students without this background stand at a marked disadvantage, and this is as true for the study of anti-colonial and postcolonial theory as for other schools and movements of thought. At the same time, it is inescapable that in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political thought, arguments about civilizational, religious and racial hierarchy play a central role. This cannot be sanitised away by dropping major texts that may offend; to do so would be to abandon serious engagement with the history of the discipline and would, in this context, be intellectually indefensible. The revised syllabus incoming in 2023 will broaden the content of the course in what we think will be interesting and stimulating ways, but the texts selected have been chosen for consequentiality, not congeniality.

### **POL9: Conceptual Issues and Texts in Politics and International Relations**

Students were generally satisfied with teaching for POL9 but mentioned the difficulty in preparing collectively for the paper when they have different areas of academic interest and diverse backgrounds. Teaching for the paper will need to consider how to better identify and maximise overlaps between the specific interests of different students, particularly with regard to the class exercises.

### **POL11: The History of Political Thought since c. 1890 and Political Philosophy**

From a small sampling, it is difficult to determine a general trend, but on the basis of this data, the majority of respondents were satisfied or better about all aspects of the course, from paper guide to supervision and lectures. Only a couple of people seemed dissatisfied with lectures overall. In response to the positive and constructive comments provided, for next year, colleagues will be asked (as they were last year) to flag the topics and focus of their lectures in advance for students, and it is worth noting that we are in the process of drawing up proposed revisions to several of the topics and thinkers on the paper, to put forward for consideration to the History Faculty and POLIS.

### **POL12: Politics of the Middle East**

The feedback for POL12 was generally positive, particularly about the supervisions. A few critical comments were made about the lectures, and these seem to have been from students who watched the online recorded versions. It seems that some of the lecture recordings were not fully audible. The lectures are aimed at an in-person audience but it appears they may have come off less well to those who sought to catch up with them later via the recordings. This problem was not raised during the course of the year by any student.

It may not be a problem next year if POLIS moves away from recording lectures. But if recorded lectures remain a feature of the course, then students are strongly advised to notify the relevant lecturer at the time if the sound quality is not good. Binge-watching the lectures in the immediate run-up to the exams prevents the sort of timely intervention that is necessary if this is to be rectified.

### **POL13: Politics of Europe**

The response rate for this year's survey was very low (4 out of 42 students) and it is hard to draw robust conclusions from such a small sample, but it is clear that most students have been happy with the POL13 paper. One student felt that the course was insufficiently contemporary, but unfortunately it is not clear whether they were talking about the British Politics or EU module. It is always made clear in the options guide that both modules contain a large historical element, looking at the period between the 1940s and the 2000s: this partly reflects the time-lags involved in producing scholarly literature, and partly reflects a belief that contemporary politics is best understood in a historical context. In 2022/23, there will be a new topic on British Politics since 2010, so hopefully this will help to address the student's concerns. The revision classes for British Politics will also continue to provide an opportunity to discuss new works and new political developments.

### **POL14: US Foreign Policy**

The small number of students who answered the feedback survey generally seem quite satisfied. There are few specific areas in which feedback offers clear guidance to improve the paper. For instance, the only negative comment on the paper overall complains that lectures at the same time lacked content and covered too much content, and also notes a level of discomfort with the fact that the exam was divided into three sections and lacked guaranteed questions. The feedback, overall, does not supply a compelling reason to alter either the content or structure of the paper generally or the lectures individually (though some of these

will be focused differently this year as a result of my own process of reflection and changes in teaching staff). There is also no compelling reason to alter the structure of the exam, given that results this year were roughly in line with results from recent iterations of the paper.

One area that does merit review involves the seminars. Some feedback notes a degree of confusion about the purpose of the seminars, and the best means of preparing for them. It is true that last year's seminars were run quite differently, and that different seminar leaders had different expectations and objectives. In the coming year, the purpose of the seminars will be clarified well in advance, with students given precise instructions on what they should do in preparation.

### **POL15: Politics of Africa**

It was pleasing to see that the overall feedback for POL15 was very positive, albeit from a modest response pool. Perhaps because the survey question on overall feedback follows the question on seminars, perhaps not, most of the general comments related to the seminars / classes. These interactive student discussion sessions are valued but a number of students considered the reading demands too much. This will be attended to this coming year, with reduced readings for seminars.

### **POL16: Politics of Conflict and Peace**

It was very pleasing that all students taking POL 16 were either very or somewhat satisfied with all aspects of the course, including the content, the lectures, the paper guide, the seminars and the readings. Students were also generally very happy with the supervisions and the feedback shows that students were engaged and interested in the material. There were some useful suggestions on additional topics we could cover in POL 16. In response, there will be a lecture on technology and conflict added, with a new regional case study on the Rohingya crisis and forced migration.

### **POL17: Politics and Gender**

There was relatively little feedback provided on the course, with most of it positive. The course was affected somewhat by industrial action in 2021-2022. The paper coordinator will meet with supervisors before the course begins to clarify expectations. While lectures are necessarily limited and cannot cover the entire world, lectures draw on a variety of examples from different regions they are meant as introductions to key issues and debates. Students are encouraged to develop supervision essays that go beyond the lectures using material from the additional reading list or consulting with lecturers and supervisors. Lecturers will be encouraged to make an effort toward drawing from more examples and literatures beyond the US and UK.

### **POL18: Politics of the International Economy**

It was pleasing to see, based from the numerical satisfaction data, that students were extremely satisfied with the teaching for this course. The qualitative responses were very limited and do not provide a basis to make the case for any substantive adjustments to the way that the course is taught.

## **POL20: Politics and Religion**

Michaelmas Term will begin, as usual, with a clear overview of topics, lectures, and seminars, to orient students to the ways in which supervisions, readings, and course content relate to exams and how students might most productively apply their intellectual and analytic independence to these materials. Moodle content includes further support on these matters. Seminar offerings in Lent Term, which require a choice of two from four options, feature two repeat and two new seminars, and will provide an opportunity to extend students' empirical and analytic efforts.

## **POL21: The Idea of a European Union**

Students were generally satisfied in this paper, which was only taken by a few, but since it is being discontinued there is no pressing need to reflect on what this meagre feedback might be trying to tell us.