

Response to feedback on POL papers within the HSPS tripos, 2016

The Department asked students to rate their papers across four dimensions: the overall scope and content, the paper guide, the lectures, and the supervisions; using a seven-point scale from '1', which was 'very dissatisfied', to '7', which was 'very satisfied'.

We were generally very pleased with the feedback this year. Most students seem to be very happy with the various dimensions of each paper and we noted an improvement in both the quantitative scores and the substantive comments for many papers. Aside from a couple of cases with fewer than four respondents, all dimensions of every paper received mean scores of over '4' or neutral, with many elements scoring between '6' satisfied and '7' very satisfied. In the substantive comments, there were positive comments about every paper.

We were especially pleased to see that feedback had improved for Pol 7, 8/10, and 9, showing that our response to suggestions and feedback from previous years have had positive effects. We also welcomed the fact that Pol 17 and Pol 18 were very well-received since it was the first time that both of these papers had been taught.

Nonetheless, there is still room for improvement in some areas. There were a number of useful suggestions, both for individual papers and more generally.

General Issues

There were a couple of complaints about unresponsive supervisors, although this seemed to be limited to a few isolated cases. The Director of Undergraduate Education will remind Part II course organisers that they are responsible for the supervisors in their paper. Students should be sure to let the course organiser know if they are having difficulty getting in touch with their supervisor.

A few students did not receive comments on their essays in a timely manner. The Director of Undergraduate Education will remind all course organisers and supervisors that they must provide written comments on essays either before or during the relevant supervision.

There were a few requests for more diversity in course content within several papers. Student representatives also circulated a list of additional suggested readings to the Undergraduate Education Committee. All suggestions are welcome, and the Director of Undergraduate Education has sent the list to relevant course organisers for them to consider. Paper guides are reviewed yearly by course organisers, but individual course organisers have good pedagogical reasons for emphasising certain authors, texts and themes.

We also noted that the student response rate was very low, especially in Part II. For one paper there were only two respondents. Several papers in Part II had response rates of less than 20%. We hope that this means that students are satisfied, but we will try to think of ways to increase student feedback response rates next year.

PART I

POL1-Analysis of Politics

As in previous years there were a number of comments about the set texts. The Department reviews the set texts for this paper every year and has made a significant number of changes over time in response to the pedagogical experience of students, supervisors and the lecturers.

For academic year 2016-17 Frantz Fanon's, *The wretched of the earth* will replace Steven Pinker's, *The better angel of our natures*. Using *The wretched of the earth* as a set text paired with Hannah Arendt, *On violence*, rather than as an essential reading for the violence theme, will, we hope, allow better consideration of Arendt's arguments and give the colonial history of the modern state and its consequences for those subject to it a clear place in the paper.

In deciding on the texts and the reading lists, there are a number of considerations. First, the texts are there to structure an introductory exploration of modern politics, which began with the creation of the modern state as a centralised site of political authority and coercive power in western Europe from the late fifteenth century and took much of its present shape with the emergence of representative democracy in late eighteenth century America and nineteenth century Europe. In the context of that history, the primary political reflections about these developments were written by European and American men.

Second, the paper is not one in the history of political thought. Of course, it includes a number of texts that can be studied in more detail in the history of political thought papers in Part II. Rather it uses some classic texts from political thought to illuminate the nature of the political world. To realise this aim comprehensively also requires introducing students to some empirical arguments, especially about democracy and its relationship to material questions and the distribution of wealth. The set texts that cover these questions about what modern democracy is like may not have the philosophical rigour of Hobbes' *Leviathan*, but reading them gives students the opportunity to think about causality in the political and economic world, which is just as central to exploring politics as considering political ideas.

Third, the reading lists as a whole must first and foremost work in terms of students' experience of essay writing and supervisions. We include a lot of additional reading for students to pursue for their own intellectual interests in a particular subject. But the essential reading is listed in relation to the suggested supervision titles and the parameters of examination questions.

POL2- International Relations I

In 2016- 17, POL 2 will change significantly and will be called International Conflict, Order and Justice. It will cover a number of themes in international politics, including international

development, the history of international order and disorder, war, foreign policy, and global justice.

PART IIA

POL3- Ethics and World Politics

2016-17, POL 3 will be a new paper focusing on international organisation. Different thematic areas will be covered, such as the global governance of security, human rights, and the international economy.

POL4 – Comparative Politics

The paper guide will be updated, with an emphasis on introducing more empirical readings. For the new modules introduced in 2016-2017, emphasis will be put on finding a balance between empirical and theoretical readings.

The Western Europe module will continue to be updated and the lectures will be revised to focus more on a few specific cases.

POL5- Conceptual issues in politics and international relations

There was one complaint about a delay in being given a supervisor. Unless a student changes their paper options after the beginning of term, they are notified about their supervisors and questions early in Michaelmas Term (for the first essay) and before Lent Term begins (for the second). The paper organiser will remind students and supervisors to organise meetings as early in the term as possible.

The paper organiser will continue to collect a sample of introductory readings from supervisors. These are supplied in the paper guide to provide orientation to the question and a place to begin discussions with the supervisor.

POL6 – Statistics and Methods

From next academic year students will be provided with more guidance for the transition from the Michaelmas to the Lent term modules. Students will be reminded that although there is some mathematical material particularly in the Michaelmas term lectures, a detailed understanding of maths is not essential to follow the main points. The practical sessions are essential for the paper. While there are no practical exercises in the exam, they are crucial to be able to understand and interpret statistical results, which the exam does focus on.

POL7 – The History of Political thought to c. 1700

The Department will reintroduce a small number of classes (similar to those that were organised in 2011-12) that will be for Politics students only, to supplement the lectures organised by the History Faculty.

When the paper guide is revised for 2016-17 the Paper Organiser will provide a set of 'pathways' for POL7, similar to those to be found in the POL8 paper guide, to help students (in consultation with their supervisors) navigate their way through the course.

POL8 – The History of Political thought from c.1700 to c.1890

The Department will reintroduce a small number of classes (similar to those that were organised in 2011-12) that will be for Politics students only, to supplement the lectures organised by the History Faculty.

PARTIIB

POL9 – Conceptual Issues and texts in Modern Politics

The comments on the Pol 9 classes were positive from all but one of the 22 respondents. The introduction of a standardised supervision arrangement seems to have been well received. Some respondents commented that the experience of individual supervisors with the paper was limited; this was inevitable in the first year of the new arrangement. As most supervisors will continue in that role for future years, this will become less of a problem.

The only substantive comment from more than one student was that it would be helpful to have a sample essay to review. The class leaders have considered this, but do not consider it would be good for students to think there is a single or ideal way of writing essays for this paper. They will continue to use the classes to discuss possible essay structures and useful writing styles, but consider that a 'model essay' approach would be detrimental to the objectives of the paper.

A number of respondents commented on experiencing anxiety with this paper. These comments were mostly written before supervisions began, and we expect the supervisions will have helped address these problems for many students. Class leaders will continue to bear this issue in mind when presenting the course in future.

POL11 – Political Philosophy and the History of Political Thought Since c. 1890

There were three items of general concern. The first was a continuing concern with the range of topics offered on the paper. Discussion with the History Faculty continues in this regard, and it is hoped to bring forward concrete proposals for revision in the course of the next year. We welcome input from students as this process moves forward. A second

point was the patchy coverage in lectures of certain topics on the paper, with the near absence of the Marxist topics being particularly remarked upon. This last problem has been rectified for next year, and we will consult with History to make sure that similar imbalances do not recur. Finally, some students requested further guidance in navigating through long reading lists. Whilst recognising that most supervisors already provide such guidance, it may be possible to provide additional guidance on reading for POLIS students in the course guide, similar to that provided this year for POL7 and POL8.

POL12 – The Politics of the Middle East

The only critical comment was that it would be useful to have a few more empirical reference points in the Muslim politics section of the paper. The section does already use a range of empirical cases, but the concern has been brought to the attention of the relevant lecturer.

POL13- The Politics of Europe

The lectures in the comparative politics section will be revised to make them more challenging and relevant for students, although they cannot be a template for supervision essays and exam answers.

POL14 – Politics of Asia

There was limited student feedback for this paper. In 2016-17, there will be a South Asia component to POL 14.

POL15 – The Politics of Africa

There was limited student feedback for this paper.

POL16 - Conflict and Peacebuilding

There were very different opinions in the student feedback about the usefulness of the Pol 16 seminar classes this year. For some students, this was their favourite part of the paper, but other students were very critical about these classes. In 2016-17, there will be an additional on-line component to Pol 16, in conjunction with Berkeley University, the National University of Singapore, and Tokyo University. There will be collaborative assignments and on-line discussions, which will replace existing Pol 16 seminar classes.

POL17 – Politics and Gender

In order to help reduce the size of supervision groups, in 2016-17, there will be some PhD student supervisors who will contribute to the supervisions.

POL18 – The Idea of a European Union

The Paper Organiser acknowledges that there were not enough copies of key course texts in Cambridge libraries, and will ensure that this will not be the case when the course is offered again in 2016-17.

POL19 – China in the International Order

There was limited student feedback for this paper. In 2016-17, a list of preliminary readings offering general overviews and mainstream analytical perspectives on China's "rise" and consequences on its foreign relations will be emphasised. The paper organiser will review the balance between breadth and depth in the first few lectures and will continue to work closely with supervisors to decide on supervision topics. The format of the final exam will be reviewed.

Department of Politics and International Studies, Undergraduate Education Committee,
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