UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

Academic Standards Committee – Summer Powers

Periodic Subject Review: Responses to the Recommendations arising from the Review of Politics held on 6 March 2019

Mr Chris Buckland, Clerk to the Review Panel

Politics & International Relations and the School of Social and Political Sciences would like to thank the panel for the supportive review process. This is a particularly challenging time for colleagues in Politics & International Relations (PIR), with the launch of the new International Relations undergraduate programme, a new Erasmus Mundus postgraduate programme and increasing student numbers across postgraduate and undergraduate programmes. PIR supports what has been one of the largest graduating degrees in the University and is now one of the very small number of Subjects responsible for two undergraduate programmes in the MA(SocSci). In light of these factors, PIR especially appreciates the acknowledgement of the hard work colleagues devote to teaching and learning and the commendations in the Periodic Subject Review report.

Below we detail our responses to the Recommendations included in the report. Overall we found these helpful and believe that they provide useful guidance on further developing our teaching programmes and portfolio.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been made to support the Subject in its reflection and to enhance provision in relation to teaching, learning and assessment. The recommendations have been cross-referenced to the paragraphs in the text of the report to which they refer and are grouped together by the areas for improvement/enhancement and are ranked in order of priority within each section.

Context and Strategy

Recommendation 1

The Panel **recommends** that the Subject and School develop a clear strategy for the introduction of the new IR degree programme and how this will complement the current Politics degree programme, ensuring both are equally supported. The Subject and School should closely monitor the impact the new degree programme may have on current provision and staff morale. This strategy should be developed and agreed in consultation between the Subject and School and ratified by the College Management Committee ensuring all teaching commitments are considered within College forward planning. [Paragraph 4.1.3]

For the attention of: Head of Subject, Head of School, Head of College

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Joint Response: Head of Subject and Head of School

As the first cohort of the new International Relations (IR) degree programme completes their first year, closely monitoring the implementation and enrolment of the programme is one of the Subject's top priorities. This will be essential for ensuring that adequate staff resources are made available to ensure the success and sustainability of the new programme.

The new IR undergraduate programme is offered as part of the MA Social Science degree with both a single honours pathway and joint honours pathways with other Subjects in the School and with Q-Step. It draws from the existing Politics Honours pathway but offers students a specialized curriculum in International Relations during the two Honours years. The Politics and IR programmes thus share a common pre-Honours curriculum. The IR pathway will be distinguished from the Politics programme in two key ways:

1. IR students will be required to take an advanced IR core course in their Junior Honours year (unlike Politics students). This required course, provisionally entitled *Contemporary Issues and Theory in International Relations,* covers key foundational concepts in international relations theory and contextualizes them via case studies of contemporary events, cases, and trends.
2. Single Honours IR students will be required to take 80 credits of IR options (40 credits in year 3 and 40 credits in year 4) to graduate. Joint IR Honours students will be required to take 40 IR option credits (20 credits in year 3 and 20 credits in year 4). This differs from the Politics pathway, in which students have more flexibility in the options they choose.

The Subject has established a working group of academic staff who are IR specialists to develop the core course and map the undergraduate curriculum to ensure appropriate depth and breadth of coverage. This group will meet at various stages of the first cohort of IR students' progress through the four years of study (i.e. until at least 2023) to monitor the implementation of the programme. Student feedback on the programme will be regularly sought through the Staff-Student Committee and fed into the working group.

Monitoring of student numbers is being coordinated between level convenors and Deputy Head of Subject, in full consultation with the College admissions office and School Student Advising Service. As the largest Subject area in the School, staffing, administrative capacity, and staff/student ratios remain a key area of concern for the Subject. In addition to the IR undergraduate programme, the Subject also significantly contributes teaching resources to other 'IR' taught postgraduate programmes within the School, most of which recruit high numbers of international students:

- MSc/MRes International Relations
- MSc/MRes Human Rights and International Politics
- MSc/MRes Global Security
- International Masters in Security, Intelligence and Strategic Studies
- Nankai Joint Graduate School

While recognising that the College has invested in recruiting IR scholars over the past several years, several IR colleagues have left the university in the last several years. And several have not been replaced (in part due to the current hiring freeze following the COVID-19 lockdown). At present just under a third of academic staff in the Subject are IR specialists. The demands on their time are likely to increase if, as expected, there are increasing student numbers on the IR undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. The Subject and School will address this by developing an appropriate staffing strategy. This

includes a number of planned posts currently frozen due to the coronavirus response as well as the development of business cases for additional investment in staffing based on growth and strategic priorities through a collaborative approach to annual school planning via the School Executive.

We are also working to ensure manageable workloads. The School has also transitioned colleagues early from LKAS fellowships to lectureships to bring in additional teaching capacity. We are developing processes for accurately accounting for and reducing high workloads - clear and transparent discussions with colleagues, clarity around allocations, reviewing admin roles and allowances for some roles, developing a sustainable study leave strategy for the Subject, and sharing capacity across Subjects.

Response: Head of College

Although the PSR was conducted last year, with a previous HoC and HoS in post, the commendations and recommendations are still relevant. I welcome the PSR report and the joint response from the Head of Subject and Head of School. Now that the IR degree is well underway, I would welcome a clear strategic plan regarding the complementarity and fit between the IR and Politics degree programmes and the support required. This plan should also include the impact on teaching loads and staff morale. Notably, it has come to my attention that over the past three years the growth in the number of courses offered across the College has outstripped growth in student FTEs, inevitably increasing staff workloads. Since the Covid lockdown, the College has encouraged HoS to review their course portfolio, leading to a 10% reduction in the number of courses offered (either suspended or deleted) in SSPS. I anticipate that greater efficiencies in course provision and team teaching may alleviate some of the pressures facing staff within the subject. I also anticipate that, once student numbers in AY 2020/21 become more certain staffing requests will be released. I look forward to discussing and ratifying the IR strategy at a future College Management Group.

Strategic planning for future growth

Recommendation 2

The Panel **recommends** that the School reviews communication, engagement and inclusion of all staff to ensure all Subject staff are given an opportunity to contribute to strategy and teaching developments in an open and transparent environment. [Paragraph 4.1.4]

For the attention of: Head of School
For information: Head of Subject

Joint Response: Head of School and Head of Subject

The College, School and Subject leadership have developed processes and modes of engagement including a range of consultative forums and opportunities for staff to feed into strategy development and raise concerns and requests for support. The College and School is also working to incentivise innovation in teaching and broader strategic developments and to streamline the approvals process for curriculum development. This includes involving subject representatives in Portfolio meetings, clearly communicating and establishing

minimum requirements for teaching and assessment, developing FAQs, working with colleagues in the College/University to develop fast track approvals processes and supporting innovation as per the L&T framework for the College. We are developing a number of online forum, a development committee and a fast track approvals process in response to the Covid19 epidemic and following the period of implementation of blended learning for 20/21 the School Executive will review what we have learned about improvements to communication, approvals and development processes for strategy and teaching during this period with a view to further improving engagement and inclusion of all staff.

Supporting staff

Recommendation 3

The Panel **recommends** that the Head of Subject should, in consultation with the Head of School and Head of School Professional Services, continue to review the administrative provision and develop and implement a plan to resolve current administrative difficulties in a manner that is resilient to the planned future growth. [Paragraph 6.3.4]

For the attention of: Head of Subject, Head of School and Head of School Professional Services
For information: Head of College

Joint response:

The Politics & IR subject services the largest number of Honours students in the School. Given the very large number of Honours students (one of the largest graduating degrees in the university) and the increasing number of PGT students, the pressure on administrative staff has consistently grown over several years, owing, in part, to the static level of staffing.

With the establishment of the International Relations undergraduate programme, the administrative pressures on staff (both academic and administrative) will increase. The School and Subject will accommodate the additional administrative load resulting from creation of the IR undergraduate programme (within the Subject and within the administrative team) within the School Workload Model. This will form part of a wider review of the model, planned for 2020 but delayed due to the pandemic. The Subject does not believe that the entire administrative structure of 'a Subject' needs to be replicated to manage the IR undergraduate programme. However, additional allocations in terms of Honours convening and, potentially, assessment coordination may be needed to successfully manage the additional workload associated with a single Subject providing for two undergraduate pathways in the MA SocSci. These discussions must also recognise that as the number of PG and UG students on programmes related to International Relations increases, staffing must keep pace with collective workload increases within the Subject.

As the PSR report notes, that there have been inconsistencies across the Subjects in the School around how they manage their teaching and this is being addressed through a revised workload allocation process which is currently being piloted by the School Executive. We are also working with College to ensure MPS workloads are sustainable and staff in these roles are properly supported as programmes grow.

Accommodation

Recommendation 4

The Panel recommends that the subject work with the School, College and Estates and Buildings to address accessibility issues in the Adam Smith Building, and to work with the Space Management and Timetabling Team to factor in distance between buildings when scheduling consecutive lectures. [Paragraph 6.3.2]

For the attention of: Head of School, Head of Subject, Director of Estates and Buildings, Space Management and Timetabling Team
For information: Head of College

Joint Response: Head of School and Head of Subject

The accessibility issues associated with the Adam Smith Building (ASB) are a regular feature in PSRs for subjects located within the ASB. As a subject we fully recognise the challenges in the building and try to schedule classes as appropriate for a building with areas of limited access. In addition we try, as best we are able, to recognise and make appropriate adjustments for the fact that some students and colleagues with mobility limitations will have a difficult (if not impossible) time of reaching all staff offices and/or teaching/meeting rooms. The space pressures across the University and difficulties in booking rooms, however, does mean that on occasion meetings must be held in buildings some substantial distance from the ASB or within rooms with limited access. The Subject welcomes the PSR report's recognition of the challenges with the ASB's layout.

The issue of timetabling and room booking has been raised in multiple student complaints. The School administrative team is working with Timetabling/Central Room Bookings to resolve the issues. The Subject would note that it suffers in student evaluations (both undergraduate and postgraduate) for poor room allocation practices.

Response: Estates and Commercial Services

Room allocations for all teaching events are made in May of each year for the following academic year. Where information on the lecturers teaching event is recorded this can be taken into account when validating the room allocations. However this is typically only recorded in less than 50% of cases and may be subject to further change.

In relation to distances for students, as the room allocation is made some months ahead of students enrolling on courses it is not usually known which courses and classes a student will choose to enrol on in order to have minimised travel time/distance as part of the timetabling and room allocation process.

In both cases the central team has to rely on Schools or Advisors notifying of any issues as soon as possible in order that options to relocate classes can be explored.

Enhancement in learning and teaching

Recommendation 5

The Panel **recommends** that the Subjects work with the Learning Enhancement and Academic Development Service to share University best practice on the use of online assessment & marking, and that the technical issues with Moodle software be raised with University IT Services to identify what steps can be taken to address these. [Paragraph 6.1.7]

For the attention of: Head of Subject
For information: Head of School, Director of LEADS, Director of IT Services

Response: Subject

The Subject recognises the need to ensure that best practices are adhered on the use of online assessment and marking. We are currently awaiting the results of the School pilot project on online assessments, which should be very helpful in identifying practices that can disseminated within the Subject.

The situation has evolved somewhat since the Panel issued its recommendations. Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, academic staff within the Subject have rapidly moved their teaching online and will be marking outstanding coursework and exams online. We fully expect that this will filter into our practice in subsequent years. To support this, we would like to request that training opportunities in using Moodle and Turnitin for marking and providing feedback to students are made available by appropriate services within the University.

Academic Standards

Recommendation 6

The Panel **recommends** that the Subject work with the School and College to provide clarity on what constitutes a minor or major change to an existing course or programme to ensure that the approval process is timely, and that Subject staff receive adequate feedback on changes which have been assessed by the College Board and School Oversight committees. [Paragraph 7.1.3]

For the attention of: Head of Subject and Dean for Learning and Teaching
For information: Head of School

Joint Response: Head of School and Head of Subject

The Subject welcomes the Panel's recommendation to clarify the process of course approvals both within the School and the College. Our experience of this process in recent years is that it is a time-consuming process that places substantial burdens on staff and stifles innovation. The current process requires staff to begin working on new courses and course changes between 12 and 16 months before a course is due to run. The School has sought to speed this up and to improve oversight processes. Subject representatives are now involved in School teaching portfolio committees; FAQs and guidance on changes required prior to approval have been improved in an effort to incentivise staff be innovative in the use of modes

of assessment, intended learning outcomes and teaching formats. The School is also developing processes so that the Subject (and School more broadly) is better able to rapidly develop courses that respond to contemporary political issues.

This includes some indications that 'summer powers' to change courses may be used more liberally during the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak. While recognising that this is an exceptional response to the current challenging circumstances, the Subject would like to request that the College consider making some of these changes more permanent, particularly by devolving greater responsibilities for course approvals to the School and radically shortening the timelines.

Response: Dean of Learning and Teaching

Course approval processes do sit largely with Schools at the moment. There are some inconsistencies across the College in how these are implemented, and it is clear that they are sometimes seen as acting as a gatekeeper rather than facilitating timely and appropriate changes. The College will continue to work with the School committees to support consistent and helpful guidance and advice.

Supporting staff

Recommendation 7

The Panel recommends that the Subject work in partnership with the College and Human Resources to build upon existing provision and ensure that staff are clear on the criteria for Academic Promotion, and that they are suitably supported through the promotion application process. [Paragraph 6.4.2]

For the attention of: Head of College Human Resources, Head of College
For information: Head of School

Response: Subject

The Subject welcomes this recommendation and will seek to liaise with the College to ensure clarity in promotion criteria. This will likely be especially important over the next several years as the substantial changes to work patterns and School/College/University expectations around academic workload due to the COVID-19 pandemic raise a large number of issues on the interpretation and application of promotion criteria. The Subject will look for clarification on how the promotion criteria will be applied in light of the directives around the prioritisation of teaching and recognition of, in some cases, substantial caring responsibilities many colleagues unexpectedly assumed.

As noted elsewhere in responses, the change in College and School leadership marks a clear opportunity to further clarify the interpretation and application of policies and criteria.

Response: Human Resources

The College HR team has initiated annual Academic Promotion briefing sessions which are delivered in the Schools including the School of Social and Political Sciences which all staff are invited to attend. These sessions are led by the Head of School and the Head of HR. During these sessions staff are encouraged to contact the HR team directly if they would like

further guidance. In addition staff can discuss the promotion process and their readiness for promotion with their line manager, mentor and/or their P&DR reviewer.

Response: Head of College

As the Head of Subject and College HR team responses outline, we will make efforts to ensure that promotion criteria are clear and, moreover, that the uneven impact of Covid-19 is taken into account. I am reassured by the approach taken by the People First working group, of which the Head of School is a member. Across the College, the HR team will work with School management teams to ensure clarity of promotion criteria – especially given the adverse circumstances staff have faced as a consequence of the pandemic.

Recommendation 8

The Panel **recommends** that efforts be made to provide GTAs with a level of peer assessment and feedback on their teaching performance, with the GTA committee being consulted on potential requirements. [Paragraph 6.4.3]

For the attention of: Head of Subject
For information: Head of School

Response: Subject

Current Practice: PIR has over years worked to establish a culture of care and support for GTAs, through regular informal coffee/pub meetings, as well as through sharing of resources, good practice and ideas. Within the School it has also led on establishing the practice of GTA observation and has offered to share its practice with others via the School GTA committee. Two of the PIR course convenors as well as PIR GTA representatives sit on the GTA committee; it has yet to be convened in the 2019-20 academic year.

Most GTAs are currently being observed by course convenors in their first year of teaching on that course. Thomas Lundberg (1A convenor) has developed an observation review form that is widely used across the Subject, usually in conjunction with a personal session to discuss strengths, suggestions and any questions or concerns that the GTA may have. There is some variability among course convenors in how strongly they encourage GTAs to take up the observation and take up varies across the courses. In addition, some convenors have suggested an informal mentor relationship with more experienced Tutors, which could include mutual observation, building an exchange of teaching practice. Direct feedback from students has been limited to a course-wide set of questions in the overall pre-honours course evaluations regarding 'my tutor'; these are most often very positive, though with little specific information about individual GTAs. Further, course evaluation has moved online in the last year and the responses have been somewhat more limited.

*Recommended Best Practice***:**

1. Consider making observation by course convenors a formal requirement for GTAs teaching for the first time on individual pre-honours courses in PIR. *(this has implications for course convenor time).*

2. Explore the viability of establishing the practice of mutual peer observation on courses, similar to the practice among PIR staff, as an option for GTAs *(Voluntary unless payment can be approved*)
3. PIR can - as it has in the past - offer to present and discuss its approach to GTA observation at the School GTA committee.
4. PIR can explore whether and how course evaluations can be modified to increase student feedback to GTAs.

Post-COVID:

The Politics & International Relations Subject believes that the issues around GTA contracts highlighted during planning for AY20-21 necessitate a root and branch review of GTA contracts.

Assessment and feedback

Recommendation 9

The Panel **recommends** that the Subject provides summary response documents to course evaluation questionnaires and that these are placed on course Moodle pages as well as provided to SSLCs. [Paragraph 6.2.5]

For the attention of: Head of Subject

Response: Subject

This is indeed the agreed policy within the Subject. As far as we are aware (through discussion at Subject meetings and a review of course Moodle pages) most course conveners do indeed upload their responses to course Moodle pages.

That said, there are gaps and not all colleagues have followed through on this policy. We will:

- Use subject meetings and communications to remind colleagues of the agreed policy and ask them to ensure that student evaluation responses are uploaded to course Moodle pages.
- Ensure new staff are informed of this practice.
- Ensure annual reminders are sent when staff receive student evaluations.

The Subject would note two points, however:

- The pilot of online student evaluations would seem to have been less than entirely successful, with a substantially diminished number of student evaluations submitted. This has distinct implications for summary measures derived from these evaluations as it is highly likely that the 'reasonably pleased' and satisfied students will be less likely to respond, whilst the dissatisfied students will represent a larger percentage of respondents. Social science research in survey methods would flag this as an unrepresentative and likely unreliable sample.
- It is well established in the literature that there are distinct gendered and racial components to student class evaluations, with female and/or BAME course lecturers—ceteris paribus—receiving lower evaluations then (British white) male course lecturers. We therefore find the reliance on student evaluations problematic and would ask the Senate Office what mitigating steps are being taken to ensure that female and BAME colleagues are not harmed or negatively impacted by systematically biased evaluations.

Enhancing the student experience

Recommendation 10

The Panel **recommends** that the subject take steps to address the perceived lack of awareness amongst UG students of the Student-Staff Liaison Committee, including the methods of communication used to make students aware of the process, and how contact details of class representatives are advertised. [Paragraph 5.4]

For the attention of: Head of Subject

Response – Subject:

The pre-honours and honours conveners invite the student representatives to meet with them twice a semester, regularly check-in via email throughout the year, and encourage them to get in touch with any concerns that arise. The conveners also encourage the student representatives to develop frequent and consistent methods of communication with their fellow students such as emails and surveys to try to isolate key areas of concern. However, we have faced some issues in recent years with a minority of student representatives not carrying out their appointed duties. The quality and frequency of communication between the representatives and their student colleagues also varies from year to year. We are currently considering a range of strategies to try and address these issues and to increase the visibility of the Student-Staff Liaison Committee:

- Establishing a process to deselect and reappoint non-performing representatives;
- Providing potential representatives with a clearer outline of the minimum expectations of the role;
- More effective and frequent communication about upcoming Student-Staff Liaison Committee meetings to all students in order to encourage broader input into the process;
- Raising these issues with the SRC to discuss additional emphasis in students representative training.

More broadly, the Subject is making other significant efforts to build staff and student collegiality, and avenues for dialogue in more informal channels. Over the last few years, the honours conveners have run an 'Honours Fair' for level two students, that allows students to meet with staff to discuss and ask questions about courses on offer, prior to their entry to Junior Honours. The Subject has also instigated various social events including a start of year drinks party and a dissertation submission party for the senior honours students. The engagement work has also been extended into developing field trips for the Honours students with groups visiting the Scottish Parliament and the EU institutions in Edinburgh. This work has been supported by the appointment of an engagement intern who has assisted with the organisation and has brought fresh ideas to the strategies developed. PIR hopes the role will be reappointed in future years and these initiatives can be extended further.

The COVID-19 pandemic does make some of these efforts to create informal channels of engagement more challenging. As a result, the Subject has decided to run a series of online events over the summer that are open to all Politics and International Relations students. These events range from online lectures and seminars by PIR staff on current political issues to a virtual pub quiz. We plan to run these events up to the start of semester one of the next academic year.

Equality and Diversity

Recommendation 11

The Panel **recommends** that the subject consider their "trigger warning" process, by which students are notified of potentially sensitive material which will be discussed in a lecture, to ensure that students are given suitable advanced warning to allow them to assess whether they are comfortable in attending. This may include providing details in course handbooks, and reconsideration given to the use of sensitive material in data sets. [Paragraph 5.3]

For the attention of: Head of Subject
For information: Equality and Diversity Unit

Response – Subject:

The Subject welcomes the positive acknowledgement in paragraph 5.3 that the Subject already makes use of trigger warnings:

5.3 The UG students who met with the Panel reported that the subject utilises the "trigger warning" process, whereby students are notified of content within the curriculum which could cause potential upset or concern. This was acknowledged as positive by the students, but it was felt that more could be done to provide further advanced warning to allow them to assess whether they are comfortable in attending. The Panel **recommends** that the subject consider this process to ensure that adequate context is provided, which may include providing details in course handbooks, and reconsideration given to the use of sensitive material in data sets.

The use of trigger warnings has been discussed within Politics & International Relations on multiple occasions, both within subject meetings and through extensive email consultation and discussion. We have noted that student representatives have not raised trigger warnings as an issue in Student/Staff Committee meetings. The Head of Subject will raise this as a point of discussion in the next meeting. (Our meeting that was to be held before the end of the academic year was postponed first due to the lockdown and has not been rescheduled as too many areas of uncertainty remain around planning for the next academic year. Once we have clarity on what we will be teaching in AY20-21 and how we will be delivering teaching, we will look to arrange a virtual meeting with class representatives.)

PIR colleagues are committed to open, inclusive and supportive classrooms and encourage student participation. Currently we have an agreement within the Subject that when potentially distressing images/materials/topics are included in class lectures/seminars/formal activities, a general warning should be given. Additionally, colleagues are encouraged to include a general note in course guides that controversial and emotive topics may be discussed in class. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that topics in Politics and International Relations can be particularly emotive and we are not able to anticipate all student contributions.