

# Political studies in the UK: a 21<sup>st</sup> century health check

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## Political studies in the UK: a 21<sup>st</sup> century health check

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Abstract: This paper consists of a short summary of the notable historical shifts in the emergence of political science as an academic discipline in the UK. We provide an assessment of the state of the discipline today, focussing upon curriculum developments and quality, student recruitment, the impact of the Research Assessment Exercise, and the PSA's membership and activities (with a particular emphasis on the role of specialist groups and activities which reach beyond the purely academic community). A substantive section of the paper will draw upon data from recent surveys, reports and benchmarking exercises to illustrate areas of particular strength within the discipline in the UK and areas where more can be done to facilitate engagement and excellence in both teaching and research.

Keywords: political science; United Kingdom

The study of politics in the UK has experienced substantial growth in recent decades, with over 1,400 full-time academics now engaged with teaching and research. In this setting, the Political Studies Association of the UK (PSA) – with its 1,635 members – is very much an umbrella organisation – representing a range of sub-disciplines and research and teaching specialisations – such as the notable rise in popularity in recent years of international studies. Whilst the UK has historically strong links with the practice of the discipline in the USA, the PSA itself also continues to forge relationships with sister European organisations – not least due to the influence of the Bologna process.<sup>1</sup>

What makes our organisation distinctive from those elsewhere is one particular word – we refer to political *studies* in the UK, not political *science*. Indeed, our national association is the Political Studies Association. An

important reason for this preference in nomenclature is historical. The particular way in which political studies developed in the UK led to 'the failure of any central core of accepted learning or theory to emerge' (Chester, 1975: 163). However, this has not hindered the fact that the study of politics in Britain has fostered important theoretical innovations to the discipline (e.g., the English school of international relations) and it has made contributions to the analysis of politics in other countries (Goetz, 2001). As shown by Dunleavy, Kelly, and Moran (2000) and Meadowcroft (1995), British political studies has been fundamental to the foundation and development of political science as a constitutive discipline in the social sciences.<sup>2</sup> The Review Steering Group's response to the ESRC's Benchmarking Review of UK Politics and International Studies praised most aspects of the discipline and found UK politics and international studies research to be of 'high quality' and 'a world leader in many areas of the discipline'. (ESRC 2007: 40).

Moreover, we will also argue that the continuing preference for methodological pluralism among politics scholars in the UK has also been central to retaining the political studies label. We consider this to be one of our contributing strengths of the overall study of politics elsewhere.

## **HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONAL PECULIARITIES OF BRITISH POLITICAL STUDIES**

In 1947 it was noted by the 2<sup>nd</sup> General Conference of UNESCO that political studies/science were developing differently between countries (Chester, 1975). This, of course, may be a response to differing national and

international issues and interests – though we may contend that the latter are much less likely to diverge in 2009 than was the case some 60 years ago. What is peculiar about the development of the study of politics in Britain is the rise in international relations (or international politics) as a specific offshoot of politics. In the UK we have a distinct sister-organisation – the British International Studies Association (BISA) formed in 1975. Not all BISA members—a much smaller academic association with only 500 members—join the PSA.<sup>3</sup>

Another facet of the study of politics in the UK that differentiates it from the United States is that methodological debates have not been as notable within the PSA as they have been in the American Political Science Association (APSA). Likewise, BISA has also maintained itself free from methodological debates (and furthermore lacks the breadth of methodological pluralism witnessed in politics). It is clear that the strong preference among UK scholars of politics is one of appreciation for methodological pluralism. This is not to suggest that there is a dearth of quality in the usage of quantitative methods by British political scientists or that research methods are eschewed. The highly regarded Department of Government at the University of Essex, to use an example, is renowned for its quantitative rigour.

Nevertheless, as a general norm, no specific methodological approach is reified in departments of political studies across the UK.<sup>4</sup> As argued by Dunleavy, Kelly, and Moran (2000: 7), ‘political science is now set up in the

UK as an inherently multi-theoretical discipline, in which alternative well-developed interpretative frameworks vie with each other for hegemony or advantage'. Accordingly most of the postgraduate training in politics in the UK tends to emphasise both quantitative and qualitative modules.

Moreover, in their survey of British political science, Dunleavy, Kelly, and Moran (2000: *ibid*) argued that 'for many years British political science remained less specialised and more eclectic than its US counterpart'. They argued that 'the relatively small size of the majority of departments encouraged colleagues to collaborate across difference subject boundaries.' Some of the leading research methods textbooks used in the UK strongly adhere to a pluralistic tradition in the discussion about the proper method to use to answer a given research question (e.g., Burnham, Gilland, Grant, and Layton-Henry, 2004).

The distinctive nature of British political studies is also entrenched institutionally. For instance, the PSA emerged within a very specific environment. Who was the association intended for? Here we can see that the notion of *the academic* may be a contentious one. In setting up the UK PSA in 1950 it was suggested that members should be university teachers (not researchers or scholars note) working in the fields of 'Political Theory and Institutions, Government and Public Administration, Constitutional and Administrative Law, International Relations, International Law and similar subjects' (Chester, 1975: 152). It was preceded in its existence by two other organisations – the Public Administration Committee and the Joint University

Council of Social Studies (Chester, 1975). In addition, Chester notes that there were just four British journals which specialised in politics in 1949 – *International Affairs*, *Public Administration*, *Political Quarterly* and *Parliamentary Affairs*. Many contributors and readers were not based in universities – clearly political tutors and researchers in UK academia had networks prior to the PSA existing. In contrast, many of the journals (not necessarily aimed at a UK audience) launched since the 1970s are far more specialized and driven by a sub-disciplinary focus (Barry, 2003: 449).

But why political *studies*? The answer to this appears to rest on two key factors – those who were prominent in delivering politics courses, and their own educational background – which led to a weak maintenance of disciplinary boundaries (Barry, 2003: 429). The title science was considered (to bring the UK association in line with IPSA) but rejected on the basis that: ‘At that time few teachers were happy at the science label... There was also a feeling that ‘studies’ was a wider umbrella than ‘science’, a particularly important consideration when so much of the writing was political history’. (Chester, 1975: 153) Even this was not broad enough for some (namely Cambridge scholars) who wanted the saving clause ‘allied subjects’ (Chester makes the point that in 1949 no representative from International Relations was invited to sign the formation letter). The tendency at that time for institutions such as Oxford to recruit trained historians as politics Fellows is indicative of the flexibility of disciplinary boundaries.

Hence, in its infancy the PSA UK did not have a clearly defined core membership – indeed it was established at a time when politics as a discipline was growing beyond a small handful of institutions – and Chester explicitly claims that the PSA would not have been set up as early as 1950 if it had not had the stimulus of an international association (1975: 161). Its steady growth in the 1960s was assisted by the creation of polytechnics.<sup>5</sup>

Yet this initial concentration of personnel and background has given way to much greater diversity. In 2009, much of the teaching and research which falls under the auspices of political studies is carried out by academics who elect to identify themselves by their sub-disciplines. Indeed one of the strengths of the PSA in the support it provides to specialist groups, which in our recent review numbered close to 50. What is also notable about such specialist groups is that some would clearly fit the fields identified by our founders, but others would not – we elaborate on this below.

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF POLITICAL STUDIES IN THE UK**

Barry (2003) asserts that membership figures are crucial to understanding the discipline – a small association will behave very differently to one with over 1000 members. So how has the PSA UK developed in terms of membership, activity and focus?

### *Delivering Politics*

Table 1 shows that membership to the UK's principal political studies association, the PSA, grew six-fold from its foundation in 1951 until 1975.

**Table 1 - PSA membership data (1951-1975)**

Year	Number of PSA members
1951	100
1960	179
1965	270
1967	400
1971	540
1975	600

Source: Chester, 1975; Barry, 2003; Tonge, 2008.

In this sense, the growth of politics as a discipline of study, allied to the increased professionalism in the management of the PSA, has resulted in very dramatic increases in overall membership to the association. For instance, Figure 1 shows that membership to the PSA has nearly doubled in a decade.

**Figure 1. PSA membership 1998-2007.**





Source: PSA, 2008; Tonge, 2008.

As Figure 1 shows, membership to PSA has grown dramatically over the years, both in relative terms across time and in absolute numbers in recent years. Likewise, BISA also enjoyed buoyant membership, reaching 900 in 2003. Despite the impressive growth in membership, it is also worth noting that there are likely to be organic membership growth constraints. Wakeling (2006: 9) observed that there are nearly 1,400 full time employed staff in politics and international studies in the UK, so ultimately membership to PSA and BISA by full time staff is not likely to exceed a certain threshold. At present, nearly 85 percent of membership to PSA comes from the UK,<sup>6</sup> and we have made significant developments in recent years to increase our international appeal as a mechanism for enriching activities and membership.

Assessing the prospects for growth of the profession based on student interest is more challenging. Chester (1975: 161) made the claim that 'the increase in the number of undergraduates is less easy to measure' – due to the

fact that politics and government were not necessarily studied as a single topic – but in combination with economics, sociology and history – epitomised by the existence to this day of PPE awards<sup>7</sup>. Chester estimates that just 4% of honours degrees involved a substantial amount of political science in 1949/50, and notes that there was no general textbook on British Government in the early post-war years.

Undergraduates apply to universities through a centrally managed UCAS system – assisting in our ability to track applications and take up of places. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century has certainly been healthy – acceptances rising from 2,741 in 2000 to 4,366 in 2005, though this tends to favour courses in international relations, rather than traditional political studies/science. Perhaps the most accurate indicator we have is HESA data – which established the number of Politics undergraduate students in 2007 as being 23,000.

Postgraduate numbers are easier to identify due to the fact that they are less interdisciplinary. Data indicate a steady and impressive growth in the specialisation of political studies. For example, whilst there were 119 postgraduates in 1967, this rose to 349 in 1975 (Chester, 1975: 161). By 2001 this had grown to 6255, which increased by half again in 2007 to 9625 (HESA)<sup>8</sup>. The PSA UK actively encourages these postgraduates to participate in the Association and we provide a range of support mechanisms via the PSA Graduate Network (PGN) – a crucial investment in the future of the profession.

As such, there is room for optimism about the future growth of the profession. It is worth noting that the ESRC (2007: 19) international benchmarking review of politics and international studies emphasised that in the UK the discipline is 'in conspicuously good health in terms of student numbers'. The ESRC (2007: 18-19) report shows that undergraduate interest in politics has nearly doubled (to 4,000 students) from 2001 to 2005, making it the second most popular undergraduate major in the social sciences. The fact that this popularity is continued at postgraduate level is a particular cause for celebration.

Yet it is important we do not judge quality by enrolment figures alone. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), an independent body funded by subscriptions from UK universities and colleges of higher education and through contracts with the main UK higher education funding bodies, was established in 1997. During an 18 month period commencing October 2000 politics and international relations provision in 65 institutions was peer reviewed. The theme of flexible disciplinary boundaries was identified once again:

'Curricula vary considerably, depending on the focus and culture of the provider, with programmes offered in the broad areas of politics, international relations and European studies... A major feature is that curricula are enriched by staff research and scholarship'.

(Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education  
Politics Subject Overview Report 2000 to 2001 QO7/2001)

*Researching Politics*

Among practitioners of the discipline, the focus of the discipline encompasses a wide range of intellectual activities. The PSA has a large number of specialist groups which appeal to a wide range of niche subjects. Some of these subjects could be termed to be traditional in outlook, yet others represent interest in non-traditional subjects. [See Table 2]

**Table 2 - Examples of UK PSA Active Specialist Groups**

'traditional' political studies	'non-traditional' political studies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political Thought</li> <li>• Urban Politics</li> <li>• State Theory</li> <li>• Public Administration</li> <li>• British &amp; Comparative Territorial Politics</li> <li>• British Idealism</li> <li>• British Liberal Political Studies</li> <li>• Parliaments &amp; Legislatures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Art &amp; Politics</li> <li>• Disability &amp; Politics</li> <li>• Learning &amp; Teaching in Politics</li> <li>• Study of Anarchism</li> <li>• Ethnopolitics</li> <li>• Sports &amp; Politics</li> <li>• Political Marketing</li> <li>• Women &amp; Politics</li> </ul>

As Table 2 shows, the range of intellectual interests among members of PSA is heterogenous. We suggest that the strong preference for methodological pluralism among UK academic institutions appears to have enabled an intellectually diverse environment that fosters innovation and which is reflected in both teaching and research.

The growth in the number and activity of specialist groups has had an influential effect on the PSA's annual conference – now in its 59<sup>th</sup> year. According to Dunleavy, Kelly, and Moran (2000: 7), 'specialist groups and journals focused on subfields became more important...and with them professional standards began to internationalize more'. Any attendee to the PSA's annual conference would immediately observe that many of the panels are devised by the specialist groups themselves – alleviating the academic organisers of at least some organisational pressure. At the same time, the active participation from specialist groups has had a tangible impact on the quality of research in political studies. Added to this, specialist groups are

the networks which provide crucial links to non-academic interested parties – such as those in political office, political communicators and policy specialists.

Greater exchange between policy-makers, journalists, civil servants, and academics has also resulted in new staff for academic jobs being appointed from non-traditional academic backgrounds. Nevertheless, what is clear is that research has become a much stronger focus for career progression – it would be challenging for a new entrant into political studies academia not to have, or be completing a PhD, and in addition a plan for publication (and grant acquisition). This has been embedded by the introduction of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 1986.<sup>9</sup> In light of these trends towards greater research output quality and professionalism, the PSA has taken a lead in providing a superb range of publication outlet choices. Among the academic services provided for members is the publication of four journals:

- *Political Studies* is a leading international journal, which is committed to publishing high-quality research in all areas of politics and international relations. First published in 1953.
- *Political Studies Review* provides unrivalled review coverage of new books and literature on political science and international relations and does so in a timely and comprehensive way. First published in 2003.
- *Politics* aims to publish cutting-edge political analysis in an accessible format and style. The journal aims to serve two principal functions: (i) publishing high-quality political analysis, (ii) serving as the ‘bulletin board’ for the discipline, providing information on conducting research and teaching politics. First published in 1980.
- *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* is committed to acting as an outlet for the best of British political science and of political science on Britain. A fully refereed journal, it publishes topical, scholarly work on significant debates in British scholarship and on all major political issues affecting Britain’s relationship to Europe and the world. First published in 1999.

Yet despite the quantitative growth in membership, activities and benefits provided by PSA membership, the discipline in the UK is not without notable 'gaps'. In particular, it is still notably a male and white discipline - women and ethnic minorities appear to face the 'glass ceiling' which begets so many professions in the senior ranks, and ethnic minorities are generally hard to find (see, e.g., Connolly and Long, 2008). The ESRC (2007: 20) international benchmarking report considers this trend to be a problematic one and argues that 'research capacity in UK Politics and IS [International Studies] is most seriously diminished by the 'missing' women and ethnic minorities'. Although this particular phenomenon is not unique to the UK or to political studies (Connolly and Long, 2008), we believe it has not received the amount of scrutiny that the issue has received by other political science associations in other countries, notably by the APSA. Sadly, the ESRC (2007: 21) report is pessimistic that 'the situation is remedying itself, however slowly'. In fact it suggests that 'it does not look like it is going to happen, certainly not any time soon'.

## **A CRITICAL SELF-ASSESSMENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL STATURE OF POLITICAL STUDIES IN THE UK**

In assessing the core strengths of an academic discipline, we would be inclined to also understand its frontiers of knowledge. As we evaluate the growth and development of British political studies, we are aware that there has been a great deal of critical self-reflection. For instance, in discussing the

core strengths of the political studies discipline, Barry (2003: 433) claimed that 'In the earlier period... it would not even be possible to talk about a periphery because that presupposes the existence of a centre'.

In compiling a critical health check we are undoubtedly faced with one important question – do the recent trends in the expansion and development of political studies matter? As early as 1975, Chester was highly critical of the 'status' of political science – claiming that in scholarship terms, politics was probably above sociology and geography, but subservient to economics, history, philosophy, law, biology and archaeology. In his view:

'Our professional services are not greatly in demand except in new countries and by the mass media... In part this is due to the fact that we deal primarily with contemporary affairs and as observers'. (Chester, 1975: 161)

Chester argued that the 'problem' for the profession was it lacked the first hand experience of politicians and public officials. In addition, Chester believed that the quality of publications often fell below first class standards.

Such claims appear, in our view, to be somewhat outdated. Rather than being subservient to other social science disciplines, the study of politics in the UK is of a high standard. For instance, compared to other social sciences, political and international studies, performs quite well in the amount of overall quality-related research income received in the UK (see Wakeling, 2006: 3-5). Moreover, Wakeling (2006: 1) also concludes that for political studies 'there is a wider dispersion of research quality through the higher education than in some other social science subjects; the proportion of



research active staff is higher'. The ESRC (2007: 15) international benchmarking review of UK politics and international studies finds that the percentage of UK papers in the top one percent, five percent, and ten percent of most-highly cited publications worldwide (based on the Thompson Scientific databases) is roughly equivalent to what should be expected.

Similarly, the level of knowledge and interaction between academics and policy makers is strong, principally as a result of growing reliance by British government bodies on evidence-based policy (e.g., Nutley, Walter, and Davies, 2007; Davies, Nutley, and Smith, 2000). For its part, the PSA hosts an annual award ceremony which attracts a great deal of attention among politicians and the media. On the other hand, it is worth pointing out there are sub-disciplines in political studies, notably political theory, where the proximity between policy-makers and academics is not required to produce world class excellence in research. The International Benchmarking Review of UK Politics and International Studies ranked political theory, including historical, analytical and applied (especially to international affairs), as one of the areas of great strength in the UK (ESRC 2007: 11-12).

Finally, Chester's claim that the quality of publications in the UK is comparatively weak also appears to be invalid. For instance, Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press rank among the top three publishers among political scientists' evaluation of publisher quality (Goodson, Dillman, and Hira, 1999: 258). The top-ranked journal in political science, the *American Political Science Review*, is published by a UK publisher,

Cambridge University Press. Other measures of international research quality in politics are worth highlighting. For instance, empirical rankings based on political scientists' ratings of the impact of selected political science journals consistently rank the *British Journal of Political Science* as one of the world's top ten journals in political science (Garand, 1990: 449; Garand and Giles, 2003: 296). A 2007 ranking of political science journals also placed the *European Journal of International Relations* as one of the top ten journals in political science (Giles and Garand, 2007: 743). Other UK-based politics niche journals, principally the *European Journal of Political Research*, *Political Studies*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Government and Opposition*, *International Affairs*, *Third World Quarterly*, and the *Journal of Common Market Studies*, also achieve high rankings in US-based ranking surveys of political science journals. Ongoing research by McLean, Blais, Garand, and Giles (2008) suggests that there is a great deal of consensus about what constitutes international quality in political science journals and this research indicates that British politics journals are highly regarded.

Partially prompted by the imperatives of government funding, UK academics in the discipline of politics and international studies are quite interested in upgrading their skills to ensure that their work achieves international quality standards. Goldsmith and Grant (2007: 399) conclude that 'British political science remains second only to the US in terms of its number of academics, and the quality of its teaching and research is constantly of a high standard'. Rajaei's (2004) survey of the international

membership of APSA indeed reveals that the UK is the second largest group of international members to APSA. As shown above, even using US-based rankings of the perception of political science quality among US-based political scientists, the quality of political science research output by UK academics is of the highest calibre.

Although it may be tempting to compare the aggregate level of quality of all US political scientists vis-à-vis their British counterparts, it is worth noting that the population of the UK is 60 million, roughly one fifth compared to that of the US. In this sense it may be fair to hold population constant, thus comparing the international achievements of British-based academics with those of a major region of the US (e.g., the Midwest, the Pacific coast, the northeast) rather than comparing them on aggregate terms based on the country's overall population. Although recent analyses have been quite critical about the quality of European political science (e.g., Hix 2004a, b; Schneider 2007) it is our contention that the study of politics in the UK is highly competitive at an international level.

This is not to suggest that the study of politics in the UK is beyond reproach or that the discipline needs to overcome significant challenges. We have outlined, for instance, the pervasive effect of a gender gap on academic promotions as an item of great weakness. Other issues have been perennial concerns among students of the development of our discipline in the UK. For instance, Chester noted three developments in 1975 which he saw as 'compromising' the ability to maintain a common core to political studies –

namely (i) the rise of area studies, (ii) the field of international relations and its relationship to political studies, and (iii) a focus on the history of political thought. For Barry (2003: 447) development approximates to a model of fragmentation, rather than specialization – the ‘centre’ absent in the early years of the UK PSA never emerged. Nevertheless, Dunleavy, Kelly, and Moran (2000: 7) acknowledge that ‘a certain eclecticism remains built-in to the intellectual sub-structure of the discipline, but now in a more intellectually productive way’. The lack of Barry’s ‘centre’ may in fact be beneficial in allowing the study of politics in the UK to stay healthy – responding to events and student interests – but in a rigorous and self-critical way.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion we can say something of the impact of internationalisation – which may impact in two ways (i) what and how we study and (ii) the development of professional networking. In his *‘Clash of the Civilisations?’* Huntington (1993) states that the world is becoming a smaller place, though we are less sceptical about the opportunities this provides for politics. Moreover, to paraphrase Thomas Friedman, the academic world is becoming flat, thus there are growing opportunities to compete and collaborate as well as to share knowledge and share work. Yet Barry (2003: 457) suggests there is nothing inevitable about greater international integration. Horizontal links with other associations in Europe is just one of three challenges identified by our previous Chair (Tonge, 2008). Tonge (2008) also identifies the ongoing

process of research funding and protection and curriculum convergence as a response to the Bologna process as critical challenges to political studies.

Our 'health check' indicates a profession which has flourished in the past 59 years – and whilst inter-disciplinarity is still a feature of substantive areas of research and not uncommon in curricula we have much greater confidence in the value of the label political science than our association founders. What we have indicated is that 'health' needs to be assessed in three ways – (i) an evolving curricula which attracts undergraduate students, (ii) a profession which can ascertain a future by appealing to postgraduates and supporting the next generation of lecturers and researchers, and (iii) the facilitation of opportunities for internationally recognised research.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The so-called Bologna process stems from a joint declaration of the European ministers of education signed in Bologna, Italy on 19 June 1999. The process is an effort to develop a uniform European higher education area by making academic degree standards and measures of quality assurance comparable and compatible across Europe. For an interesting survey of the state of political science in Western Europe, please see Klingemann (2007).
- <sup>2</sup> James Bryce's *The American Commonwealth* (1888) and *Modern Democracies* (1921) are some of the discipline building studies in political science. Moreover, Michael Oakeshott, Brian Barry, Samuel Beer, Bernard Crick, Isaiah Berlin, Gerry Stoker, and many others have been leading voices in the contemporary analysis of political studies.
- <sup>3</sup> Barry estimates a membership overlap to be just 100.
- <sup>4</sup> Although some departments have opted for the moniker, 'Department of Government', there is only one department in the UK that identifies itself as a department of political science (i.e., the University of Birmingham).
- <sup>5</sup> Polytechnics were tertiary education institutions in the UK which mixed academic and practical training. After 1992, many former polytechnics were designated as new universities and were able to grant their own academic degrees.

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- <sup>6</sup> Rajee (2007) notes that the international membership of APSA is 14.1 percent of total membership, roughly equivalent to that of the PSA.
- <sup>7</sup> PPE refers to a degree combining Politics, Philosophy and Economics and is traditionally associated with old universities such as Oxford, Warwick, York, Manchester, Durham, Essex, University of East Anglia and Kent.
- <sup>8</sup> The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) is the official agency for the collection, analysis and dissemination of quantitative information about higher education.
- <sup>9</sup> The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is a review, undertaken by the principal education funding bodies, of the research output of all higher education institutions in the UK. The most recent evaluation process under this assessment exercise was completed in December 2008.

### About the Authors

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