

## Teaching and learning

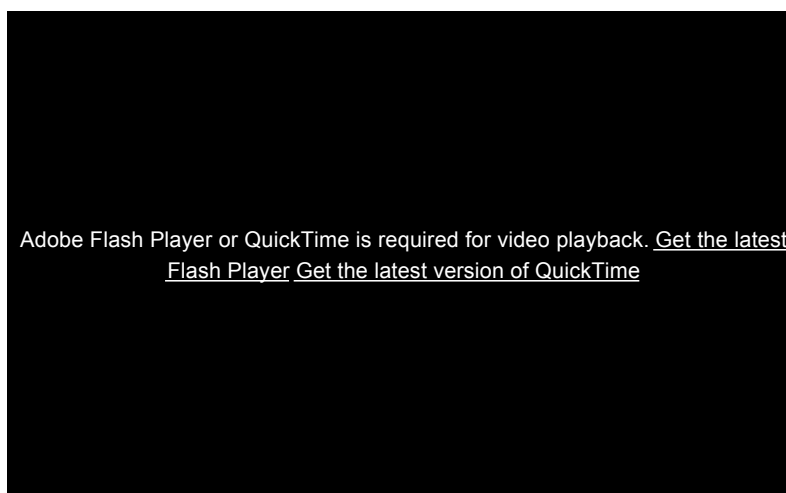
We advocate an enquiry-based approach to learning, which means that we encourage you to become an independent and self-motivated learner. Through the programme of study we offer, we will develop the qualities that employers value in today's university graduates - qualities that will set you apart in your future career.

To help you develop the above-mentioned skills, we adopt a range of teaching methods. They may include:

- **Lectures** - listening to experts sharing their knowledge and discoveries in challenging and provocative ways. Students are expected to 'read-around' the subject matter of their lectures, adding to their understanding and developing their critical faculties and analytical skills.
- **Seminars** - where you present and discuss your ideas and knowledge in smaller groups and debate interpretations and opinions with other students.
- **Tutorials** - are your opportunity to discuss your work with your tutor, usually in small groups.
- **Workshops** - are problem solving sessions facilitated by a member of academic staff; these sessions usually involve students working in groups.

Our lecturers and tutors will ensure you have all the resources you need to make the transition from A levels to the more rigorous demands of a degree.

## Contact time and Academic Staff



The principles of learning espoused by POLSIS as a Department has three constituent parts:

- Student-centred
- Research-led
- Committed to social justice

The University of Birmingham has identified two key areas in learning and teaching activity: Strategy and Quality Assurance and Enhancement.

This concentration of expertise and responsibility in the Department translates into the provision of learning and teaching activities that are in compliance with the University's Codes of Practice and that function in many different ways to enhance and support the student learning experience, from admission to graduation and beyond.

## Enquiry-based learning

[Open all sections](#)

Enquiry-based learning (or EBL) can be described as learning that arises through a structured process of enquiry within a supportive environment, and which is designed to promote collaborative and active engagement with problems and issues.

Within EBL approaches, learners are encouraged to take responsibility for seeking evidence and analysing their knowledge with the purpose of making implicit reasoning and tacit knowledge explicit (Price 2003).

The student is placed very much at the centre of the learning process, and presented with greater independence in decisions relating to his or her learning (hence the term 'learner independence'). A key role of the tutor is to facilitate and support the learning process to provide students with opportunities to work collaboratively in order to pool their collective knowledge and understanding, as they work together to create new knowledge for particular purposes.

In summary then, EBL can be thought of as a broad umbrella term that:

- describes a range of approaches to teaching and learning;
- is guided by a process of supportive enquiry;
- is structured to foster learner independence through active (and usually collaborative) engagement with relevant and meaningful problems and issues.

**[Enquiry-based Learning at the University of Birmingham \(https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/social-sciences/college-services/elearning/Showcase/Designing-for-Enquiry-Based-Learning-\(DiBL\).aspx\)](https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/social-sciences/college-services/elearning/Showcase/Designing-for-Enquiry-Based-Learning-(DiBL).aspx)**

## Innovative practice

In POLSIS, we are always looking to devise creative and interesting activities that can enhance learning. Over the past few years we have implemented a range of innovative practices across the undergraduate and postgraduate curricula, as detailed below.

- Briefing papers
- Democracy and technology

- Virtual conference on UN Reform debate
- Problem solving/case study approach to Economic Negotiation
- WTO Negotiation simulation on Doha Development Agenda

## Briefing papers

The first term assessment for International Political Economy (POLS 205) consists of a series of innovative 1-page briefing papers on course readings that address specific questions relating to lecture topics and course themes. This form of assessment provides extra incentives for students to closely read, take notes on, and fully comprehend the course texts, as well as encouraging students to develop their analytical and critical thinking skills further. In particular, compared with more traditional assessment formats such as essays or exams, these short briefing papers help students to develop the ability to condense complex information into a brief logical summary, a learning skill that is helpful in its own right (as many employers are more likely to require succinct briefing papers and reports rather than full academic essays) and which also fosters the development of analytical skills that enhance students' skills for essay writing and exams.

For teachers, briefing papers also help to highlight areas where students are struggling to comprehend complex information, and therefore show where further explanation and discussion may be required.

## Democracy and technology

Students on Contemporary Political Theory (POLS 302) explore the idea of a deliberative democracy through the use of the technology. Students are asked to investigate a 'live issue' on a discussion forum (such as <http://www.opendemocracy.net/forums> (<http://www.opendemocracy.net/forums>)) and discuss whether they can identify changes in opinion and the formation of a consensus (or at least a narrowing of disagreements) as a result of deliberation, as deliberative democrats claim should happen.

From this students go on to debate whether or not the internet can facilitate deliberative democracy. They explore this issue by looking at examples of political blogs and asking whether they have widened democratic participation in political debates and evaluating the contributions they have made to public discourse.

## Employability

Our graduates are well prepared for the world of work whether they chose to work in the public, private or third sector.

POLSIS is committed to working closely with employers and students to ensure that our students have the opportunity to develop the skills that are in demand and that are essential to the professional development of graduates.

Our curriculum as well as our learning and teaching enable students to graduate with the following skill sets that employers and alumni tell us are essential.

The strengths that we focus on in the Department are derived from those identified by Universities UK, and there are seven of particular relevance to POLSIS students.

*The 'lucky seven' aspects of employability*

### 1. Self-management

Readiness to accept responsibility, flexibility, resilience, self-starting, appropriate assertiveness, time management, readiness to improve own performance based on feedback, reflective learning.

### 2. Teamworking

Respecting others, co-operating, negotiating/persuading, contributing to discussions, and awareness of interdependence with others.

### 3. Problem solving

Analysing facts and situations and applying creative thinking to develop appropriate solutions.

### 4. Communication and literacy

Application of literacy, ability to produce clear, structured written work and oral literacy – including listening and questioning.

### 5. Information literacy

Basic IT skills, including familiarity with word processing, spreadsheets, file management and use of internet search engines.

### 6. Initiative and originality

Frequently mentioned by both employers and universities is entrepreneurship/enterprise: broadly, an ability to demonstrate an innovative approach, creativity, collaboration and risk taking.

7. Underpinning all these attributes, the key foundation, must be a **positive attitude: a 'can-do' approach, a readiness to take part and contribute, openness to new ideas and a drive to make these happen.** : a 'can-do' approach, a readiness to take part and contribute, openness to new ideas and a drive to make these happen.

Our approach to employability is both flexible and developmental.

- We review our skills provision annually to ensure that we are able to respond to changing demands in the employment sector.
- We encourage our student to be aware of the need to develop their employability skills.
- We facilitate student-employer engagement opportunities to improve student employee and career learning, and better market the attributes of our graduates to future students and future employers.
- We have a range of curriculum enhancement activities with which students can get involved to enhance their graduate attributes, including the POLSIS Annual Student Conference.

**POLSIS Graduates are innovative, independent individuals who are reflexive in their approach, professional in their attitude and positive in their engagement with others.**

## Research in learning and teaching



Rogers (1967) "To free curiosity; to permit individuals to go charging off in new directions dictated by their own interests; to unleash the sense of inquiry; to open everything to questioning and exploration; to recognise that everything is in process of change – here is an experience I can never forget"

In order to understand how best to facilitate learning, and to ensure that learning in POLSIS is an experience students 'never forget', many of our staff members are involved in research into pedagogical theory and practice.

Scholarship on learning and teaching, published in leading disciplinary journals such as *Politics*, *International Studies Perspectives* and pedagogy journals including *Enhancing Learning in the Social Sciences*, enables academics to engage with theoretical approaches to learning activities and to explore issues and concerns in learning and teaching.

## Assessment is for Learning: Feed forward feedback

This project is a student-centred, student-led investigation of the current mechanisms of formal and informal feedback given to undergraduate and taught postgraduate students in the Department of Political Science and International Studies.

The project aims to investigate:

- whether current feedback mechanisms are meeting the needs of the students
- whether current feedback mechanisms are facilitating deep learning and effective learning strategies
- whether current feedback mechanisms can usefully be revised to better meet the needs of student learners

This is a pilot project that, if successful, can be rolled out across the School of Government and Society and then to the College of Social Sciences. The project will also inform similar projects planned for implementation at the University of Cardiff and the University of Ulster.

Principal Investigators: [Emma Foster \(/schools/government-society/departments/political-science-international-studies/staff/profiles/foster-emma.aspx\)](#)

## eLearning

This research introduced some ideas about using internet classrooms to enrich the experience of those learning and teaching politics. It drew and reflected upon my three-year experience of using internet classrooms to teach politics in optional and compulsory politics undergraduate modules, providing critical evaluation of the successes and problems involved.

Output: Lee, D. (2003) 'New Technologies in the Politics Classroom: Using Internet Classrooms to Support Teaching and Learning' *Politics* 23(1), 66-73.

---

[Privacy](#) | [Legal](#) | [Cookies and cookie policy](#) | [Accessibility](#) | [Site map](#) | [Website feedback](#) | [Charitable information](#)

© University of Birmingham 2015

