

[PIR Semester One Courses 25-26]

External Examiner's Comments

**General Comments**

Across the PIR courses reviewed, the overall design is coherent and purposeful. Learning outcomes are clearly articulated, topic coverage is broad yet well-balanced, and assessment strategies are generally well aligned with the aims of individual courses and the wider programme. In several instances, the structure of tasks and the scaffolding provided to students (e.g., staged activities and well-specified briefs) also indicates careful attention to progression and skill development across the semester.

A notable strength is the currency and relevance of the curriculum. Taken together, the portfolio of offerings supports a rounded education in politics, diplomacy, the news media, and international relations and appears well suited to preparing students both for professional pathways (including policy-relevant work) and for further academic study.

Assessment practice is particularly varied and, in many cases, thoughtfully innovative. Students are assessed through a mix of essays and more applied formats, such as essays, oral presentations, critical reviews, annotated bibliographies, and research proposals. Traditional essays continue to play an important role in developing advanced research and academic writing, but what stands out across the reviewed courses is the consistent effort to broaden assessment beyond the conventional essay-only model. This range of formats aligns well with UDL principles, offering multiple ways for students to demonstrate achievement of key learning outcomes.

Workload and level of challenge are generally consistent across the set of courses and appear comparable to taught postgraduate provision at institutions I am familiar with in Ireland, the UK, and Canada. That said, there is some variation in assessment density. A small number of courses combine multiple substantial components with regular weekly tasks; while these designs can clearly support continuous engagement and steady skills development, they may be experienced by some students as "over-assessment" relative to programmes where two assessment components are more typical. At the same time, where assessment loads are heavier, they are often accompanied by strong scaffolding – that is, particularly clear guidance on how to approach tasks and structured opportunities to remain engaged with weekly materials.

### Comments on Scripts reviewed

The scripts and sample assignments reviewed suggest that students are being held to an appropriately high standard, with marks distributed across a wide grade range in ways that reflect genuine differences in quality. Overall, marking practices appear fair, accurate, and internally consistent. Higher-quality work was clearly rewarded, weaker work was graded accordingly, and the standards applied were appropriate for taught postgraduate level.

Feedback quality varies somewhat by course and by assessment type, but the prevailing pattern is positive. In almost all cases, feedback is very detailed and constructive, and clearly oriented toward improvement. Students at the lower end of the grade range typically receive specific explanations of weaknesses alongside actionable guidance, while stronger students are given clear confirmation of what they did well and how they might continue to develop their work. Particularly effective practice across several courses is the use of well-designed feedback templates and rubrics that break performance into distinct dimensions (e.g., content/argument; engagement with literature; communication and style). This criterion-based structure helps students identify strengths and weaknesses in discrete parts of their work, making the feedback easier to interpret and more likely to support measurable improvement between assessments. In a small number of cases, there may be scope to increase the quantity of feedback for particular assessment types—especially where the genre is unfamiliar to many students (for example, annotated bibliographies)—but, overall, the commitment of staff to supporting student development through feedback is evident and commendable.

Drawing on the course-level materials reviewed, several additional points of good practice are worth highlighting in a general way:

- Strong guidance and scaffolding: Multiple courses provide exceptionally clear instructions on how to complete assessments, which is especially valuable where assessment formats depart from the standard essay.
- Consistent use of categorized feedback: The most effective feedback instruments use distinct, transparent criteria (e.g., argument quality, engagement with scholarship, style and communication), supporting student understanding and encouraging targeted improvement.
- Assessment designs that sustain engagement: Weekly low-stakes tasks (such as submitting questions based on readings) appear particularly effective for ensuring preparation and enhancing seminar discussion.
- Participation grades as a lever for engagement: Where included, participation grading can be a useful mechanism for supporting sustained classroom engagement in seminar-based courses and could be considered more widely where pedagogically appropriate.
- Attention to progression toward dissertation-level work: Assessments such as research proposals and annotated bibliographies can serve as strong preparation for intensive dissertation writing.

**Matriculation**

**Observations and Adjudication**

**POLITICS5004**

*The files were not available for review.*

**POLITICS5009**

The workload of this course was well-suited to the course aims. The combination of a group oral presentation and an argumentative essay is designed to evaluate a broad set of competencies - ranging from teamwork and spoken communication to critical analysis and persuasive academic writing.

The sample assignments were graded in a fair and consistent manner, and the feedback, which was helpfully separated into "content" and "communication and style" for the group oral presentations, that was provided offered constructive direction for students looking to strengthen the quality of their academic work.

**POLITICS5011**

With its four categories of assessment – a case study, group presentation, individual reflect report, as well as shorter weekly tasks – I imagine that students on this course may perceive the overall assessment load as somewhat heavier than in many of their other courses, where assessment is often limited to two components.

At the same time, the amount of guidance provided to students regarding how to complete the assessments is very impressive. Likewise, the quantity and quality of feedback provided across the assessments is excellent. The assessments were marked fairly and consistently.

**POLITICS5065**

Both essays were assessed with fairness and consistency. The course leader provided detailed and constructive feedback to students across all grade levels.

**POLITICS5079**

The essays and critical reviews were marked fairly and consistently. I was particularly impressed with the use of the distinct categories in the feedback forms for the critical review and essay, such as "Did the author demonstrate knowledge of the relevant literature?" and "Is the argument convincing?" These ensure that students who engage with the feedback will understand the strengths and weaknesses of different aspects of their assignment. I was pleased to see that participation grades were included in the range of assessments for this course. I find them to be a useful way to encourage student engagement in the classroom and recommend that they be considered for other seminar-based courses.

**POLITICS5099**

Grading was applied in a fair and consistent manner across both assessments. The guidance given to students on how to complete the essay and case study is exceptionally strong. Similarly, the feedback provided across the assessment components is both substantial and high quality. What stood out most to me was the way the feedback templates for the case and essay break performance down into clearly defined criteria - for example (for the essay) whether the student shows command of the relevant scholarship and whether the overall case is persuasive and (for the case study) whether the student engaged with a range of learning outcomes like "critically examine the concepts, policies and economic exchanges that have influenced the development of the global economy." By separating these dimensions, the feedback forms make it much easier for students who read the feedback carefully to pinpoint what they did well and where specific elements of their work need improvement.

**POLITICS5107**

The marking is both fair and precise – quite appropriate to the standards of a taught postgraduate course, and proportionate when set against the clear differences in quality across the sample assignments. As with POLITICS5011, I suspect that some students taking this course may feel over assessed because of the combination of two major essay assignments and multiple weekly tasks. With this said, however, the nature of the weekly tasks – submitting questions based on the assigned readings – is very good way to keep students engaged with the course materials and ensure they are well-prepared to discuss the readings during the classroom sessions. As with many of the other courses under review, the course leader provided detailed, constructive, and well-categorized feedback to their students on the assessments. I am confident that, as long as students engaged with the feedback provided on Essay 1, it would have helped them improve their performance on Essay 2 later in the semester.

**POLITICS5109**

Both the research proposal and the annotated bibliography were assessed in a fair and consistent manner. The detailed feedback provided on the research proposals was excellent. I think students could have benefitted from somewhat more feedback on the annotated bibliography, particularly because I suspect that relatively few students have undertaken an assessment like this prior to this course. Overall, I think the feedback should help prepare students to undertake a period of intensive dissertation writing.

Signature



Date February 11, 2026

Please use extra sheets as necessary
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