



Queen Mary
University of London

School of Politics and International Relations

Student Staff Liaison Committee

Wednesday, 7 April 2021

2pm-4pm via Microsoft Teams

Approved by Chair

In attendance:

SPIR staff: Dr Nicholas Hostettler (Chair), Dr Daniel Gover (SPIR Library Liaison), Mr Marlon Gomes (SPIR School Manager), Dr David Williams (Head of SPIR), Dr Chris Phillips (SPIR module convenors for POL318), Dr Joe Hoover (SPIR Careers Liaison), Dr James Strong (Director of Education), Bronwyn Murphy (Student Support Officer), Dr. Madeleine Davis (SPIR Director of Education), Amerisida Dibra (PG administrator)

Course Reps:

School of Politics and International Relations	First name	Last name
Economics and Politics Year 2 - Rep	Pietro	Barba Navaretti
Politics Year 3 - Rep	Vanessa	Beale
Politics and International Relations Year 2 - Rep	Stephanie	Boateng
History and Politics Year 3 - Rep	Emma	Bowker
Politics Year 1 - Rep	Antony	Demetriou
International Public Policy (MSc) - Rep	Ivie	Edebiri
Economics and Politics Year 1 - Rep	Sonya	Hofer
International Relations (MA DL) - Rep	Haroun	Lazim
Politics and International Relations Year 2 - Rep	Michael	Mere
International Relations Year 1 - Rep	Gabriel	Oancea
Politics Year 1 - Rep	Will	Quinnell
Politics Year 2 - Rep	Adam	Rook
Politics Postgraduate Taught - Rep	Satria	Setiawan
International Relations Year 1 – Rep (student co-chair)	Vida	Stanic

Secretary of SLLC: Jason Salucideen

Noted that Vida Stanic (student co-chair) would chair the meeting.

PART 1 – Preliminary Items

1. Apologies for absence

School of Politics and International Relations	First name	Last name
Exam Board Deputy Chair	Elke	Schwarz
Politics Year 3 - Rep	Rebecca	Jackson-Walley
International Relations Year 2 - Rep	Alan	Kakkassery
International Relations Year 3 - Rep	Shahin	Patel
School of Politics and International Relations Rep	Krista	Tingbrand

2. Approval of the notes of the previous meeting

2020/21 66: The committee accepted the minutes of the last meeting held on 27/01/21.

3. Matters Arising

2020/21 67: No matters arising from previous meeting.

PART 2 - Student Reports

4. Verbal/written reports from students

2020/21: 68 Noted that the committee received a report from 1st year course reps, which documented the results of a new 5 minute survey of 1st year students the reps had sent out. The Student Chair spoke on the results follows:

2020/21:69 Student Chair noted that many students did not know who their adviser was, however 100% of those surveyed did hear about the SU elections. Student Chair concluded from this that a good approach is the send information frequently to students to improve the chances of them reading it. Chair explained the question of communication comes up regularly and SPIR try to keep students informed while not overwhelming them with too many communications but that it is difficult to balance this.

2020/21:70 Student Chair asked whether any in person events could be held once lockdowns ease, as students living on campus would like to have some form of in person gathering. Head of School explained that the recent government announcement did not address Universities and that the Principal wrote that little had changed. Therefore although SPIR would prefer to return to on campus activities, the school must continue to operate under similar restrictions as it had done the past 3 months.

2020/21:71 Student Chair noted that most students preferred Blackboard Collaborate as opposed to Microsoft Teams, for their online teaching. Also noted that some spoke highly of Zoom. Chair responded that he was pleased students preferred Blackboard Collaborate as it was the most used online teaching platform in SPIR, and also worked well for staff.

2020/21:72 Student Chair noted that several students had complained about the Lecturer's wifi for POL105, specifically that the connection would break frequently. Chair responded that such issues are best raising promptly with the convenor directly and then students could contact SPIR Directors of Education if the issue does not get resolved.

2020/21: 73 Student Chair noted a major dislike amongst students for the content of POL105, that it led to students disengaging and finding it difficult to comprehend. Chair responded that it would be useful to get more details on what specifically students are finding difficult, not just for POL105 but for all modules. The Chair explained that next year he would be asking current 1st years about their experience at 1st year, which will give students the opportunity to bring up these issues in more substantive detail.

2020/21: 74 Student Chair noted a response in the survey from a student that said some lecturers and tutors had lacked care and empathy and ignored them when reaching out about their mental health. Chair responded that he was sorry to hear a student had a bad experience with their tutor/s. Chair explained that we would require further details on the specifics of this and that students can speak to the module convenor about the tutor or they can raise it with someone else if the convenor is who they had the issue with. Chair explained that it is useful for staff to hear about how they come across to others as they may think students see them as approachable but students may get a different impression, and feedback is welcome to help staff be aware of any perceived issues.

2020/21: 75 Chair noted regarding results of the survey that he could appreciate students feel anxious about the POL199 exam and that he would clarify in an upcoming POL199 lecture that all advice and materials made available already on the module are all that is required for the exam. Chair added that all past exams papers, for all modules, are available via the school landing page on QMplus.

2020/21: 76 Chair noted that he would take up issues raised concerning POL199, and that he and the SPIR Directors of Education would take up issues raised concerning POL105.

2020/21: 77: Noted that the committee received reports from 2nd year reps regarding issues to be discussed.

2020/21: 78: Noted that 2nd year students seemed happy overall.

2020/21: 79: Noted some 2nd year concern that there were multiple deadlines within the same period a 'bunching' of deadlines. Students also concerned about deadlines too near to Exams. Chair explained that we're aware of the issue of 'bunching' deadlines, each year SPIR try to avoid this, though it has proven impossible to completely avoid for a range of reasons. For example final assessments must typically be at the end of teaching, which could cause bunching. Also if a student takes a module outside of the school, we cannot pre-emptively avoid bunching between all potential optional choices across different schools.

2020/21: 80: Noted some 2nd year students wanted a 'no detriment' policy. Chair noted that in SPIR's experience the policy did not help. The effect was that students entered the 2nd or final year without having finished their 1st or 2nd year respectively. Meaning that they had to carry over extra work to the next academic year, causing them to be overburdened. These students were already struggling and unable to pass, so they are now even more burdened by work but likely still struggling with the same issues that caused them not to pass prior. SPIR is finding alternative ways of helping students who are struggling.

2020/21: 81: Chair noted clarification that the 'no detriment' policy was not intended to address the issue of students underperforming. Exams boards review student performance and if they find that a cohort has underperformed they will check for reasons such as whether staff have marked too harshly, the board will then take corrective measures to adjust a cohorts marks, if appropriate. Chair noted that it is helpful for students to be aware that the effects of the 'no detriment' policy have not been good and that Schools have other methods of addressing issues like underperforming via exam boards. Student rep suggested SPIR make an announcement clarifying the effects of the 'no detriment' policy as currently students are not aware of the potential negative consequences of it, as some benefited from having poor grades removed. The Head of School agreed a communication to students would be helpful and agreed that the impact the policy has had on students has been mixed. Head of School also clarified that SPIR are not in control of whether or not they could implement a 'no detriment' policy, it was a college wide decision not to implement a 'no detriment' policy and the decision was taken several months ago.

2020/21: 82: Noted from 2nd year rep that some students were having difficulty accessing essential readings and asked that links be provided to each of the essential readings on a module. Chair responded that SPIR made sure this year that every Module reading was available through the Library. It is School policy not to provide links to students because being able to research for oneself is a key skill SPIR want students to cultivate. Students must be able to use a Library's search engine, if they cannot find the material after searching then they can let SPIR know. Final year rep agreed

that using the Library search function is an essential life skill and noted that those she spoke to do not want SPIR to provide links, also noted that they're very happy the online Library is working again. Final year noted that some modules would provide links to students and others would not which led to students in module's who did not, potentially being dissatisfied, rep believed this may have been something some modules provided because of the issues with the online library not working in term A. Reps noted tutors are quick and helpful at providing readings when a student is unable to access it or find it. Director of Education explained that the search engine the Library uses can behave oddly because it pulls together various subscriptions all of which function slightly differently, and that the renewal dates of subscriptions could fall within the academic year so there is a practical reason against sending links to students as the link could change at a random point in the year, whereas if students search themselves it would not be an issue. Google Scholar tends to work best.

2020/21: 83: Noted from SPIR Library Liaison officer that he could be contacted if students were having any Library related issues. Student chair noted that there is an issue with some ID cards not having a chip in them and she will contact the SPIR Library Liaison officer about it.

2020/21: 84: Noted from 2nd year rep that some students wanted to know if they could receive compensation, a partial refund of their tuition fees, because of staff strikes, and covid19 issues. Chair noted that students could write to the Principal as this was not something SPIR could address.

2020/21: 85: Noted from 2nd year rep that some students do not find 'breakout groups' in webinars to be very productive. Some modules frequently utilise 'breakout groups' however some students do not find it as productive as it should be, for example if students in the group have not done the required readings and cannot contribute. Student Chair noted that this issue was also raised in other Year groups by course reps. Director of Education explained that the feedback from students was useful and would be considered when planning for next year but noted that 'breakout groups' have also been successful in some modules. Director of Education noted that students should raise issues directly with the module convenor in the first instance because it is faster to receive a response than via SSLC, if students have contacted convenor but not received a satisfactory resolution they can speak to the Directors of Education, Head of School or SSLC Chair. Chair noted that SPIR staff shared many of the same frustrations with online teaching as students and that SPIR brought in consultants to best advise staff on how to run online teaching to try to deliver the best experience possible.

2020/21: 86: Noted from 2nd year rep that some students were concerned about POL299. Some felt that a 4000 word essay for the final assessment was too much work given the circumstances students continued to experience due to the pandemic, and because the deadline was close to the exam period. Students also raised concerns regarding the content of the module, that teachers were not engaging enough, some felt the content was boring, and that students were not contributing in class and found it hard to engage with other students and the tutors on the module. Students would like the module to be examined and possibly changed for future year groups with regards to it's content and the amount of work on the module. Masters DL rep added that they felt tutors did not have pedagogical training, which would help for both on campus and online sessions. Director of Education responded that they would look into the POL299 issue in more detail, also noted that staff

do all have pedagogical training however it has been large learning curve this year for staff and students with regards to online pedagogy.

2020/21: 87: Noted some final year student concern that it was unclear how the zone of consideration worked with regards to students who were within 1.5% of borderline. Chair clarified that the zone of consideration applied to each grade boundary, and that in normal circumstances it was applied to those falling within 1% of borderline but that had been changed this academic year to within 1.5% of borderline due to the impact of the pandemic. Chair explained that once a student falls into this zone of consideration there is a formula to determine whether or not a student is moved up to a higher classification, which looks at the marks of the student across all their modules, the decision is not at the board's discretion, the formula must be applied. It is a formal process and the rules are set by the College regulations. Dissertation convenor clarified that if a student gets 68.5% in their dissertation that is still not a 1st class dissertation, 70% is a first. The zone of consideration is only with regards to potentially moving your whole classification up, it does not mean that the threshold for a 1st class has changed, it is still 70% or higher.

2020/21: 88: Noted some final year student concern that students were under the impression staff would mark more leniently this year but have found that their grades have either been the same or worse than they're used to. Finding this to be the case on marks received so far, has led some students to feel even more anxious about what grade they will receive for their dissertation, which is a large portion of their final year mark. Director of Education noted that although students may perceive they're trending towards worse marks this year, that is not actually the case based on data SPIR has gathered across its modules, however it will not be until the exam boards meet to confirm final marks that SPIR will look at this in detail across each module.

2020/21: 89: Noted final year feedback that students are happy about being able to apply for extensions and self-certify but are anxious about a recent communication that no further extensions can be provided other than that students could ask to complete the work in the late summer resit period. The communication made some students unclear if they completed the extension request correctly or if they needed to reinput it to request a late summer resit rather than an extension. The Student Support Officer clarified that the recent communication was with regards to applying for ECs for the Dissertation. The SPIR dissertation deadline was changed from 26th April to 9th May, the communication explained that if a student could not submit by 9th May and wanted an extension then there would not be enough time to mark/moderate the submission before the Exam Board so they could not be granted an extension, instead, if a student did apply for an extension to the Dissertation they would be considered for a later summer uncapped first take for 2nd August.

2020/21: 90: Noted final year query/concern on whether or not other institutions they may apply for would look unfavourably upon them if they received their dissertation marks late due to applying for a late summer first take. Student Support Officer responded that it is not uncommon for final year students to require a late summer resit for a multitude of reasons. This does mean that those students would not get their results until September, if such students are applying for Postgraduate studies with another institution SPIR are permitted to liaise with that institution to confirm results.

Any final year student who is applying for Postgraduate study and is concerned about not being able to confirm their results with that institution can contact the SPIR office and we can deal with that institution directly to confirm results or to at least confirm they've met the institutions entry requirements.

2020/21: 91: Noted final year rep query regarding whether or not students submitting the dissertation in the late summer could still contact their supervisors for support after the end of week 12. Dissertation convenor explained that this would require discussion within SPIR as staff would not typically hold office hours or be available as often outside of term. Head of school will liaise with Directors of Education and the Dissertation Convenor to discuss but it was noted that there will be support available to students resitting in the late summer.

2020/21: 92: Noted that no PGT student was present at the meeting but the MSc International Business and Politics rep did submit their concerns to the secretary prior to the meeting. Concerns included that many students complained about the mechanism for the PGT dissertation which required students to submit a proposal before being assigned a supervisor. Some students felt they did not have anyone to discuss their proposal with, the feasibility of their proposed topic, was the scope for discussion enough etc. PGT rep also raised the issue of breakout groups, noting that some students found it less engaging or useless.

PART 3 — Programme delivery and other matters

5. Examinations

2020/21: 93: Noted some 1st year student concern that they had never done online exams before and that the guidance SPIR had sent out on 48 hour take home exams was not detailed enough. 1st year feedback was that they had no guidance, no revision support, tutor's seemed uninformed at the time they enquired. For POL199 some feedback was that they felt having only had small writing portfolio assignments on POL199 has not prepared them for the final assessment of POL199 which is a long form writing Exam. Noted from Economics and Politics rep that this was particularly felt by these students because they do fewer modules which develop essay writing skills. Chair explained that SPIR have been spreading out Portfolio and Essay writing tasks across modules to help students develop POL199 Convenor explained that the structure for Portfolio and long writing assignments were much the same, so the Portfolio tasks did teach students to write long form but the convenor explained that he would make this clearer to students. For POL105 student feedback was that an exam for this module did make sense but that the topics they would be examined on are only taught in the last two weeks of term, leading them to feel underinformed, unprepared, and wanting more revision sessions. Chair noted with regards to first year anxiety that it is helpful for students to be reminded that overall the first year only counts towards 10% of their overall degree.

2020/21: 94 Noted Rep query regarding whether or not having exam online this year would have any impact on when students received their results. Chair clarified that it would not, the release of marks is part of a wider process that would not be affected even if staff could mark online exams faster than hardcopy exams.

2020/21: 95 Noted some student concern over the logistics of a 48 hour exam if they're in countries with different timezones. Chair explained that exam timetables which took into account timezones was not possible but that students had 48 hours. Chair explained that during regular exams students would only have 2-3 hours to complete it and that students completing their online exams should view it in a similar way and not feel they must utilise all 48 hours. Guidance is to utilise no more than 6 hours of the 48 hours. Directory of Education noted that there are advantages to 48 hours exams as it let's a student choose a time that suits them, for example some exams fall within Ramadan and students can choose to do their work at a time of the day when they're not fasting because of the advantages of a 48 hour exam. Director of Education may update and circulate the videos he sent out last year about doing online exams.

2020/21: 96 Noted from SPIR Careers Liaison officer that there seems to be a divide between what SPIR provide to students and their anxiety over final assessments and Exams. For example a large number of students may have anxiety towards the exam but only a small number of them have reviewed the materials module's have provided on preparing for those exams, such as lectures and readings. It is worth considering for future how to bridge this divide, between staff not giving students what they need and students worrying about the wrong things.

6. National Student Survey

2020/21: 97 Noted that Final year students are being asked to complete the National Student Survey, and we ask that reps encourage their peers to complete it. It is only for Final year students. SPIR need a certain number of respondents so that the results can be included in league tables, and the Chair confirmed that SPIR have met that response target. Director of Education noted that the NSS is the only standard opinion survey run in the UK for students at all UK universities. All final year students across all UK universities are asked a series of questions about their experience of studying at their university and universities take these results very seriously. The feedback it provides can help SPIR find out about issues that it may not normally via it's usual methods. For example SPIR sometimes get a mismatch between the feedback they receive via its module surveys and via the NSS. The NSS helps capture feedback on students wider experience whereas our internal surveys mostly focus on the classroom experience. NSS results also feed into league table rankings which the university is concerned about so SPIR try to improve their NSS results by learning lessons from feedback, improving their pedagogy etc. New for this year the Director of Education has made videos informing final year students how they've used previous NSS feedback in the past, it is intended to continue this practice. SPIR want students to understand that their feedback is valued and to understand the importance of completing the NSS. Student Support Officer noted that the college have invested more in services due to feedback received from the NSS, for example more investments in Disability, Advice and Counselling, and Library services. Currently we have over 50% response rate.

7. Any other business

2020/21: 98: Chair noted that next week SPIR would make available its module evaluations across the school and SPIR would be grateful if all staff and students would engage with that process. Free Text boxes are where students have substantive comments to make, whether positive or negative.

2020/21: 99: Chair noted his thanks to Vida for chairing the meeting and thanks to course reps for their work this academic year.

8. Date of next meeting: TBC for next academic year.