

Political Science Teaching Across Europe

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INTRODUCTION

Political science continues to be a popular, fascinating, and—above all—deeply relevant discipline in twenty-first century Europe. The aim of this article is to examine undergraduate and graduate education in the discipline of political science in Europe. Composed of three sections, the article examines firstly, political science education in Europe from various angles; secondly, the variations within European countries; and finally, the differences between Europe and the United States of America from a European perspective. As Mike and Chris Goldsmith observe, the teaching of political science has attracted less attention than research. As they state, it has been regarded “as ‘less glamorous’ than research, albeit that most professional political scientists teach more than they research” (2010, s61). Likewise, Gabriela Pleschová refers to a “perception conundrum” (2014, 139) whereby it is widely recognised across Europe that teaching needs to be given more prominence but yet the focus continues to be upon research.

Until the last decade or so, the central focus has been upon researching within political science as opposed to any concentration upon the teaching aspect (*cf.* Lightfoot and Piotukh 2015, for detail about the teaching/research nexus). In the United Kingdom, moves toward a Teaching Excellence Framework (or TEF)¹ along the lines of the Research Excellence Framework may lead to much greater emphasis upon what is taught and, indeed, how it is taught. Across Europe, teaching has become more important in the higher education sector with greater pressure than hitherto for academics to possess a teaching qualification. Also, with the greater emphasis upon fees and what some observers regard as the marketization of higher education, students are increasingly demanding greater value for their money. Political science, alongside other disciplines, has to ensure not only that lecturers have the requisite knowledge, but also that they are able to impart and convey that knowledge and skills to the next generation of political scientists. Students expect and deserve high quality teaching. The era of league tables, Key Information Sets (KIS) data, and Destination of Leavers in Higher Education (DLHE) data² and ranking means that potential students are able to shop around. As with other disciplines, political science tutors have to be able to demonstrate that they deliver a high quality “product.”

BACKGROUND

Political science remains a popular discipline at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The teaching of political

science is, however, a relatively recent phenomenon when compared with the history of political science *per se*. As Mike and Chris Goldsmith illuminate, it “is largely a late twentieth century development ... [and it] was not until after the Second World War that the teaching of politics and political science in Europe really blossomed” (2010, S62; also see Goldsmith and Goldsmith 2010 for further information about the history of political science teaching). In the past decade or so, possibly one of the key changes within political science education in the twenty-first century has been much greater emphasis upon the “student voice.” Effectively, there has been greater involvement of students themselves in their own teaching and learning. In part, the driver for this has been because across Europe, students are paying more for their post-compulsory education, and there is a greater need than ever before for students to have their say and to be heard³ (Saul 2014; *USA Today* 2015). This development is, however, also based on sound pedagogical theory that the more that students are involved in their own teaching and learning, the more effective that learning process will be (*cf.* Zepke and Leach 2010). Another phenomenon, of the past ten years or thereabouts, is the fact that new technology (Anson 2015; Blair 2013; Thornton 2012; and Valeriano 2013) has increased the involvement of audio-visual resources in the teaching and learning of politics more than ever before—for example, there is greater use of video material and online resources. It is much easier now for the political science lecturer to access video and audio material to enhance the teaching and learning process.

The gender dimension has also changed over the past couple of decades with respect to political science teaching. This is both in the number of women studying political science (although political science statistically remains a predominantly male discipline) but also in the subject matter itself. The student is much more likely to study women and political science than previously when the gender dimension was very often entirely absent from any political discussion or debate (Briggs and Harrison 2015; Childs and Krook 2006). Likewise, race is also studied to a much greater extent than hitherto (*cf.* Spencer 2012). Indeed, there is more attention paid to equality and diversity across the teaching of political science. The issues of gender and race are highly relevant and discussed in most political science curricula and modules. Virtually all politics degrees have at least one optional module where questions of race and gender form an integral part. There has been increasing gender mainstreaming over the past decade or so. In part, this is due to the strength of the feminist movement.

At most higher education institutions, race and gender tend not to be required courses but are increasingly important as optional modules more than was the case, say, ten years ago. They increasingly feed into the curriculum in a cross-cutting way and are certainly less marginalized than hitherto.

In terms of *how* political science is taught, the traditional approach has been a classic lecture and seminar format; however, over the last decade or so, there has been a much greater emphasis upon teaching transferable skills as part of a political science degree. For example, glossophobia, the fear of public speaking, still ranks alongside the fear of spiders for many adults. Thus, presentational skills are covered as part of a political science degree alongside other key skills such as group-work/team building activities and problem-solving techniques, which all contribute towards making the political

There has also been greater focus upon aspects such as assessment and feedback to ensure that students not only understand why and how they are being assessed but also that they fully comprehend the feedback that they receive on their work (Blair et al. 2012; Blair et al. 2013; and Raymond and Usherwood 2013) and that they are able to learn from this and improve in future assignments. The feedback loop is, therefore, intrinsically important in the teaching and learning of political science. Students are able to build upon earlier assessments if they take heed of the feedback that they receive.

A further development, over the past decade or so, has been an emphasis on the more practical aspects of political science teaching. Many courses now offer the opportunity for internships or placement opportunities with practicing politicians, civil servants, local government officers, or pressure

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science graduate more marketable vis-à-vis the world of work (see the Subject Benchmark Statement for Politics and International Relations for details of what a political science degree ought/could entail⁴). Employability is a buzzword amongst political science tutors as they seek to facilitate not just knowledgeable graduates but graduates that are ready for the workforce (Ashe 2012; Buckley and Reidy 2014; and Curtis 2012). Over the last ten years or so, there has also been greater emphasis placed upon statistical data analysis and ensuring that political science graduates are sufficiently equipped when it comes to quantitative methodological approaches in addition to qualitative methodology. In the United Kingdom, the Q-Step initiative,⁵ a £19.5 million programme funded by the Nuffield Foundation, the Economic and Social Research Council and by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), was aimed at ensuring that political science, amongst other disciplines, places greater emphasis on the teaching of statistics. It supports 15 universities in setting up specialist Q-Step centers across the UK, in response to a perceived shortage of social science graduates with quantitative skills.

On a pan-European basis, political science teaching often utilizes innovative teaching methods in order to convey the subject matter (Gormley-Heenan and McCartan 2009, on audience response systems; Ralph et al. 2010, on podcasting and political science teaching; and Blair 2013 on the use of Twitter; Thornton 2012, on new technologies *per se*). For example, there has been the much greater usage of simulations and role play in order to enhance the learning experience (*cf.* Brunazzo and Settembri 2015; Guasti et al. 2015; and Obendorf and Randerson 2013). As Michael Brintnall and Kimberly Mealy highlight with their analysis of the situation in the United States, this is not just a pan-European phenomenon but a global one. They declare, “Now every faculty member must confront technology in the classroom; and all have access to remarkable new tools for learning” (Brintnall and Mealy 2014, 168).

groups, to name a few. Over the last ten years, most political science degrees at least have internships as an option. They are not as widespread as in the United States, but they are increasing in popularity as greater attempts are made to engage students in “real” politics. The idea is that students will acquire hands-on experience. This is again enhancing their ability to move in to the workforce. There have also been moves for students to feed into policy making and contribute to the creation of knowledge. This happens at postgraduate level—especially in terms of those writing a PhD thesis in political science whereby they must demonstrate that they are adding to the sum of knowledge—but also more frequently at undergraduate level where schemes encourage students to become involved in research projects that mean they too are adding to knowledge and may even be contributing to policy (for detail on undergraduate research projects, *cf.* Lightfoot and Piotukh 2015; Neary and Winn 2009; and Page 2015). This notion of impact—contributing to knowledge and making a difference—has permeated down from academics to students. As Simon Lightfoot, senior lecturer in European politics at the University of Leeds states, “Where possible, we should encourage politics undergraduates to engage with research at all levels of study. I would argue that this not only allows them to develop and refine their skills and enhances their employability, but overall provides a more enjoyable and stimulating university experience.”⁶ There are, therefore, significant merits to be gleaned from this particular pedagogical approach.

The long-standing Erasmus Programme (its successor Erasmus Plus began in 2014), which facilitates study or work across the European Union and partners, has provided more opportunities for political science students to travel and study abroad. There have been increasing levels of interest and awareness of the value of the scheme, and this interest is reflected by trends whereby students wish to enhance their CV. The notion of the “global graduate” and emphasis upon inter-cultural skills come to the forefront with the

cross-cultural dimension and the internationalization of the political science curriculum.⁷ Likewise, the Bologna process, which aims to ensure comparability of degree standards on a pan-European basis, has also facilitated greater freedom of movement of political science students across Europe. From the Bologna Declaration, signed in 1999, this emphasis on parity and standardisation has accelerated mobility of political science students and staff.⁸

At the postgraduate level, there are many opportunities across Europe for students to study political science. This might be through a taught masters degree (these are usually

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one year full-time or two years on a part-time mode of study), or it might be through a masters of philosophy degree or a doctorate of philosophy in politics. Again, these can be studied on a full-time or part-time basis. The PhD thesis, usually about 80,000 words in length, has to demonstrate that it is filling a niche and is contributing to the sum of knowledge via original research. Taught masters in political science are often a popular route through to a research degree. Indeed, the dissertation, usually a component of a masters degree, is often a precursor to the research degree and its written thesis. Many masters degrees include “politics” within their title, but other descriptors include globalising justice, gender and women’s studies, or citizenship (to name a few), for which the political science content is probably a little less obvious but nonetheless integral part of the subject matter. In part driven by the Bologna process,⁹ as Goldsmith and Goldsmith point out, “Increasingly, students stay on to master’s level: we can expect their numbers to increase, and for them to demand for more specialist (relevant) courses at this level” (Goldsmith and Goldsmith 2010, S67).

POLITICAL SCIENCE TEACHING IN EUROPE

Political science is a popular subject across the whole of Europe. In numbers, it is difficult to give a precise figure but Goldsmith and Goldsmith (*Op. Cit*, S62) quote Hans-Dieter Klingemann’s observation that by 2005 “there were more than 300 universities teaching politics to more than 150,000 students” (Klingemann 2007, 23). Students usually cover a range of areas, including political theory, political ideologies, political history, political culture, the policy-making process, comparative politics, policy analysis, area studies, international relations (this remains a separate discipline but the level of synergy between the two remains strong), political participation, political socialization, and political behavior, to name a few. If there is an emphasis, it is probably correct to say that the European focus tends to be slightly more toward comparative political science than is the case in the United States. This is hardly surprising given the proximity of countries within Europe, thus meaning that the existence of differing political systems and political cultures within a close range offers a wealth of data, experiences, and material that makes a comparative focus inevitable (*cf*: Caramani 2011; Hague and

Harrop 2010; and Lane and Ersson 1999). This is not to say that the United States does not utilize the comparative approach (as works by Bingham Powell et al. and Ishiyama testify) but that it is probably a fair assertion to state that there is less emphasis than in Europe.

In many continental public universities, it remains free to study at higher education level. This is akin to the situation in the United Kingdom prior to the introduction of tuition fees in September, 1998 (which were then subject to significant increases to the current level of £9,000 per year). Countries with free tuition include Central Europe (Slovakia, Poland,

Hungary, the Czech Republic), some Nordic countries, and Low countries, amongst others. It remains the case that, in most of Europe, higher education is still perceived as a public good that benefits the whole of society and not simply specific individuals.

It appears that there is no in-depth discussion about the introduction of a TEF-like mechanism currently taking place in continental Europe. The only countries that might potentially head towards a Teaching Excellence Framework, or similar initiative, in the future are possibly Ireland, the Low countries, and the Nordic countries. But there is little discussion of something similar to the TEF in these countries at the moment. It appears, therefore, that with advocates and detractors of the process in equal measure, the United Kingdom is the only country moving ahead on this at the current time.

One of the key organisations supporting political science teaching across Europe is the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR). Set up in 1970, it has around 300 institutional members emanating from around 50 countries and supports teaching, training, research, and cross-national cooperation of political scientists, via activities such as graduate student conferences¹⁰ and summer methods training.¹¹ The ECPR’s standing group *Teaching and Learning Politics* (see Pleschová 2014) is a relatively recent grouping, formally set up in 2011 and, in part, building upon the legacy of the European Political Science Network (epsNet). Its activities include “organising panels at the ECPR General Conference, publishing about issues of teaching and learning politics, running a specialised website, organising a summer school for beginner political science teachers, and ... a new book series for political science educators” (Pleschová 2014, 143). Aimed at new and also more experienced political science educators, the group provides support for the teaching and learning of political science. The standing group, and the ECPR more generally, can also help political science educators from countries where national political science associations have “not yet formed groups supporting enhancement of teaching, including both large and smaller associations like Austria, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Slovakia, Switzerland as well as others, and where structures are missing to enhance quality education” (Pleschová 2014, 142–3). The Teaching

and Learning Politics standing group also seeks to foster greater links with existing organisations such as “the APSA Teaching and Learning section, the PSA’s Teaching and Learning in Politics group, the BISA’s Learning and Teaching group,” and the Political Studies Association of Ireland’s Teaching and Learning Politics Specialist Group (Pleschová 2014, 144).

VARIATION WITHIN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

There are key, if subtle, differences between the teaching of political science within European countries. It is certainly the case that European countries teach political science, in the first instance, from the perspective of each particular country and through the lens of their own experience. According to Gabriela Pleschová, co-convenor of the ECPR Teaching and Learning Politics Standing Group, the teaching of political science in universities is not a priority.

There are subtle differences between how political science is taught in Europe and how it is taught in the United States.

Pleschová states, “While in some European countries, notably in the UK, Ireland, Nordic countries and in the Low countries, institutions have increased the recognition of quality teaching, in many other countries of Europe quality of education is still not a priority.” She continues, “This also relates to political science programs.”¹² It appears to be the case, therefore, that in addition to differences across European countries in *what* is taught under the banner heading of political science, there are also key distinctions to be made in *how* political science is taught, with some countries placing greater emphasis upon teaching skills and pedagogical approaches than others.

Brid Quinn, a teaching and learning political science expert from the University of Limerick, Ireland, illuminates the changes taking place within the teaching and learning of political science in Europe: “Significant developments in the teaching of political science in Europe include a broadening of the range of pedagogical praxis and growth in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Implementation of these developments varies from country to country according to context, curriculum, and resources. Notwithstanding country-specific contexts and resource issues, there is widespread acceptance of a move towards student-centred learning and openness among faculty to new ways of teaching political science and new ways of framing and implementing their chosen pedagogies.” Quinn elucidates, “Although Europe may have come later to the articulation and institutionalization of these themes than the USA and Australia, the pace of change in Europe is remarkable, with particular significance being accorded to the teaching of political science because of its role in enabling citizens to make an informed, considered, and valuable contribution to society.”¹³ Clearly, teaching and learning has increased in importance on a pan-European basis. It is no longer simply about *what*

is taught but also about *how* that information is conveyed that has become increasingly important.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN EUROPEAN POLITICAL SCIENCE TEACHING AND THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

There are subtle differences between how political science is taught in Europe and how it is taught in the United States. In the United States the American Political Science Association (APSA), was founded in 1903 (*cf.* Brintnall and Mealy 2014, for detail about the role played by APSA). Alongside research, one of its primary objectives is to promote “high quality teaching and education about politics and government,”¹⁴ but it has a relatively young teaching and learning political science section. As stated earlier, there is an emphasis upon comparative politics with the teaching of political science in Europe. It is interesting to note that the key American learned society for

the discipline is the American Political Science Association, whereas in the United Kingdom it is the Political Studies Association. This constitutes a subtle but significant difference that may lead to more of a concentration upon scientific methodological approaches to the teaching and learning of political science, for example, upon quantitative data analysis, studies of electoral data, and statistics. This is not to say that other approaches are absent, but it is possible to detect a slight emphasis in this direction. This is an over-generalization in the search for trends or emphases as, clearly, there are programmes in Germany, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, for example, which are very quantitatively oriented too. Likewise, in the United States, it is also possible, for example, to identify a strong area studies tradition.

One journal for political scientists with respect to teaching and learning in the States, and beyond, is the *Journal of Political Science Education (JPSE)*. It is now under the umbrella of APSA and recognized as one of its official journals. Founded in 2005, its focus is the teaching of political science and it provides a fitting resumé of the key areas of the teaching of political science in America. These articles contribute to a large and developing literature on discipline-specific teaching and learning practice. One classic article that helps to provide more of a contextual background is Rogers M. Smith’s piece “Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in America” in the *American Political Science Review (APSR)*. It outlines the scope of traditional political science and looks beyond the traditional, liberal approach ensuring that specific groups/identities are not excluded from political science teaching (Smith 1993).

Political science is taught across a broad range of differing institutions in the United States. According to Sherri Wallace, associate professor in political science at the University of Louisville,¹⁵ “How political science is taught depends on the

type of institutions—community college, liberal college, public or private university—and the needs of that institutional curricular program.” As she states, “It’s all very broad and sporadic.” It is difficult, therefore, to avoid sweeping generalizations in terms of how it is taught—there is such a wide variety. Wallace continues, “Political science is viewed as a ‘science’ using formal theories and modelling by the Behaviorists in the discipline; however, Normative (theoretical) scholars tend to view it as the study of the principles of democracy and institutions of government. Both tend to have an elitist focus on governmental institutions more so than on investigations on the influences of culture and society. Most programs in the US are organized around these broad focus areas: American, Comparative, International Relations, Theory, Policy Studies, and Public Administration (again, depending on the type of institution).” Wallace is of the opinion that there “has always been friction between the primary ‘researchers’ and the ‘teacher-scholars’ (the overwhelming majority) in the discipline. The discipline itself has only recently elevated the *JPSE* to the same status as *APSR* and other research journals, which is to say that we are only beginning to value ‘teaching’ political science in the same way as we value doing political science research.” There are definite parallels here between political science teaching in Europe and the United States.

In the United States, there are similar issues to those faced in certain parts of Europe. It appears to be a time of change for political science teaching. The 2016 APSA Teaching and Learning Conference website states, “There are a number of significant trends that are currently impacting higher education, including rising costs, student debt, assessment and accountability, MOOCs, changing student populations, and more.”¹⁶ It seems that, as in Europe, this is a time of flux in America too.

THE FUTURE

It is interesting to speculate what is likely to happen with political science teaching in the future. Tutors will, no doubt, continue to find interesting and engaging pedagogical approaches to convey their subject matter. The movement away from the lecturer as the font of all knowledge to a relationship that is more akin to a partnership approach looks likely to continue with the student and tutor equally engaged and fascinated by their discipline. Using this approach, the tutor becomes more of a facilitator or guide, helping the student to research and unearth knowledge and information themselves. The ideas, arguments, and political philosophy will continue to attract many political scientists. Likewise, there will be those who are equally, if not more so, engaged by the practical application of politics and the fact that it is a real world, living subject. As Clodagh Harris and Brid Quinn illuminate, “University teachers strive not only to achieve excellence and effectiveness but also to substantiate those attributes” (Harris and Quinn 2015, 257). If current trends continue, there will be healthy recruitment of the next generation of political scientists. Political science recruitment is buoyant, but it does tend to be affected by events at national and international levels—be that the Obama Effect, a concern for issues such as environmentalism, migration policies, or an

ongoing interest in the so-called “war on terror”—and in that sense has a tendency to ebb and flow slightly. Political science teaching remains as relevant today as it has for many decades. Aristotle dubbed politics the “master science,” and whilst feminists today may balk at the chauvinistic moniker, its enduring relevance and attraction is surely beyond dispute. Sufficient rationale exists, if such were needed, to ensure that the teaching of political science remains of central importance. ■

NOTES

1. See Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2015) *Fulfilling Our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, November, Cm 9141, London, Her Majesty’s Stationery Office. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/474227/BIS-15-623-fulfilling-our-potential-teaching-excellence-social-mobility-and-student-choice.pdf accessed 15th December 2015.
2. League tables rank universities according to various criteria, including student satisfaction scores from the national student survey, staff/student ratios, and graduate prospects. Key Information Sets refers to information that universities must publish and, for example, includes class contact hours, assessment methods, and accommodation costs. These are intended to help students to choose the right university/course for them. The DLHE Data provides information on graduate destinations six months after graduation and also detail relating to average starting salary for those in full-time employment.
3. See Compare Tuition Fee Schemes in Europe <http://www.studyineurope.eu/tuition-fees> accessed December 21, 2015.
4. See <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/SBS-politics-15.pdf> accessed 21st November 2015. Subject benchmark statements set out expectations of standards in any given subject area. They help to define a discipline and to illustrate the skills, knowledge and abilities that a student may acquire. Academics, employers, and students are all likely to find the benchmark statements a useful guide (Quality Assurance Agency 2015).
5. See <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/q-step> for further information, accessed 26th November 2015.
6. Email correspondence with author, December 8, 2015.
7. For detail re-Erasmus see http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/documents/erasmus-plus-programme-guide_en.pdf accessed 18th December 2015.
8. For a detailed analysis of the Bologna process, see Reinalda and Kulesza 2006.
9. *Ibid.*
10. For details about the graduate student conference see <http://ecpr.eu/Events/EventTypeDetails.aspx?EventTypeID=1> accessed December 18, 2015.
11. See <http://ecpr.eu/Events/EventDetails.aspx?EventID=107> accessed December 18, 2015.
12. Email correspondence with author, November 24, 2015. Dr Pleschová is assistant professor of politics at the University of Economics in Bratislava, Slovakia.
13. Email correspondence with author, December 2, 2015.
14. See <http://www.apsanet.org/ABOUT/About-APSA> accessed December 3, 2015.
15. Email correspondence with author, December 16, 2015.
16. See <http://www.apsanet.org/tlc> accessed December 3, 2015.

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