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An Audit of Transferable Skills Teaching in UK Politics Departments

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Abstract

Social science departments are regularly criticised for a perceived failure to provide their graduates with a range of transferable or employability skills. This is particularly acute in many politics departments which have the difficulty of not being seen as a vocational subject. This article provides a national audit of levels of transferable skills teaching in UK Politics departments, carried out in academic year 2013-14. It will argue that there is much good work in these areas being carried out in the UK political studies community, providing students with a range of transferable skills they will find of great use as they move towards employment. It will however observe that the discipline is poor in highlighting this in the online descriptions of course content they provide to students (and their parents).

Introduction

For some time, lecturers at UK Universities have had to address the issue of providing students with transferable skills in the classroom. This has been driven by government policy, both at the national level and also at the level of the devolved institutions who also have competence in higher education policy. The argument has been that there is a perceived skills shortage which is holding back the British economy, and that it therefore falls to education providers to make up this skills shortfall. This falls particularly heavily on the University sector given its growth in recent decades. Moreover, both main parties have converged around this narrative for higher education (Souto-Otero, 2011). Like it or not, Universities are therefore in the business of providing transferable skills which their students can then use and display in the employment market.

With vocational subjects, this may seem to present little difficulty. With non-vocational subjects however the situation is different. Social science departments are, for example, regularly criticised for a perceived failure to provide their graduates with a range of transferable or employability skills. This is particularly acute in many politics departments which cover a range of varied topics, from political and international theory, to international relations more generally, which do not immediately appear to address skills and employability issues. Little comparative knowledge exists which maps how these skills are taught across different institutions (Burke et al, 2005). This paper therefore makes an important contribution to the literature on transferable skills and political studies teaching by providing a national audit of levels of transferable skills teaching in UK Politics departments, carried out in academic year 2013-14. Importantly, it will argue that, despite the popular perception, there is much good work in these areas being carried out in the UK political studies community, providing students with a range of transferable skills they will find of great use as they move towards employment. Based on an analysis of the module descriptions provided online, it will nevertheless argue that the discipline is poor in highlighting this to students on such publicly accessible platforms.

Discussion proceeds in four sections. The first part of the paper sets the context around transferable skills and the employability agenda, outlining the skills, objections to the employability agenda and setting out some expectations to guide the subsequent analysis. The second part briefly outlines the data used in this study while the third section moves on to provide an analysis of these data. The conclusion reflects upon some issues that the political studies profession needs to address going forward to counter criticisms around these issues.

Transferable Skills: Context and Issues

While teaching and researching their subject area is what most academic staff in the UK will have joined the profession for, in recent years they have had to consider and implement a range of different

agendas and issues which many will have given little thought to when doing their doctorates. In the teaching field, chief among these has been the need to deal with what has variously been called either the skills agenda, or alternatively the employability agenda.

This has been driven by a range of factors. Firstly, the need in various surveys, such as the Key Information Set (KIS) for Universities, to demonstrate either employability or the employment destinations of graduates six months after graduation. With the importance of such surveys in recruiting and advertising to potential future students, this is an institutionally important driver in emphasizing employability. Similarly, the National Student Survey (NSS) asks more generically about students' personal development, problem solving and communication skills. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly when skills and employability are taken together, the fact that government higher education policy has been heavily emphasizing the need for HEIs and subject areas to provide graduates with a range of skills sought by employers. Indeed, underlining this, in the UK government, HE no longer resides in the Department for Education, but in the Department of Business, Industry and Skills (BIS). Thirdly, some of this has also been student driven. Students, and their parents, do want to know what their employment options are after they graduate, and as has been seen elsewhere, do demand that they be taught a range of skills of use to employers (Takata and Leiting, 1987: 144). Clark (2011: 136), for example, has shown that politics students are concerned about their general level of skills, their statistical and numerical ability, and working together with others. Skills anxiety has perhaps risen in salience since the introduction of student tuition fees in most of the UK, not least since £9,000 fees were legislated for by the coalition government in 2011 and implemented from 2012.² Finally, there have also been international drivers, such as the European Bologna process and its emphasis on employability and skills (Maurer and Mawdsley, 2014). It is also an agenda which has become evident in other countries and settings beyond Europe (Chattopadhyay, 2013). The internationalisation of British HE and reliance in some areas on overseas students adds a further impetus.

A key argument has been that a perceived skills shortage is holding back the British economy, and that it therefore falls to education providers to make up this skills shortfall. This falls particularly heavily on the University sector given its growth in recent decades. Discussing business-university links, a recent government-sponsored review of these issues gives a flavour of this, putting the emphasis very much on universities when it recommended that:

Universities should reflect on the opportunities that are provided for students to develop employability skills through the formal learning methodologies used within the university and ensure that students are able to articulate the skills they have developed through their learning experiences. It is for universities to ensure that their staff have the appropriate skills to support students in this process (Wilson, 2012: 10 Reflective recommendation 5).

Post-devolution, the UK government is in reality only responsible for HE in England. Nevertheless, this narrative has also influenced the post-devolution governments and their policies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. For example, the 2007 Scottish Government strategy talks of ensuring that ‘in teaching individuals, [Universities] provide them with essential skills’, that this is closely matched with the needs of business and the economy and that ‘all publicly-funded learning is geared towards helping individuals utilise their skills’ (DET, 2007: 48 and 43). The Northern Ireland government has been most emphatic in this, using terms that have potentially severe implications for humanities and social sciences. They argue that ‘the department will encourage the higher education sector to *rebalance the current academic profile with a greater emphasis on STEM* (Science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and economically relevant subjects’. The aim is to promote graduate employability, skills and upskilling (DEL, 2012: 3; Italics added).

Often the development of this agenda in the UK is traced to the 1997 Dearing Report which put skills at the forefront of its recommendations (National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education 1997; Lee et al, 2014; Maurer and Mawdsley, 2014). In reality however, the skills agenda has become an area in which policy between the two main parties in the UK has converged over time. Souto-Otero (2011) traces Conservative and Labour manifesto pledges in HE between 1979-2010. He argues that in the 1970s-80s, party policy in HE offered a clear choice; Labour policy emphasised widening access, while Conservative policy underlined the importance of HE to economic development through providing training and skills for students. From the late-1980s, Labour policy changed to reflect a similar economic impetus for HE provision. More recently, both the Labour governments from 1997-2010, and Conservative-led governments from 2010 have each underlined the importance of this agenda, thereby ensuring it is something which is an ongoing issue in HE teaching outlasting changes in administration. Occasionally it also breaks into public debate, as in the widely quoted remarks in 2003 by then education secretary Charles Clarke about the use of medievalist scholars to the economy, or in comments made by business organisations such as the CBI (2013).

What are the skills that Universities are meant to be providing graduates with? Many articles on the topic note a confusion of terms and skills in this area (Burke et al., 2005; Bridges, 1993; Kemp and Seagraves, 1995; Nabi and Bagley, 1999). Typically a distinction is made between so-called 'essential' skills involving numeracy and IT competences, and 'employability' skills. These tend to be 'soft' skills such as the ability to work in teams, communication and problem-solving skills. A further distinction is often made between lower and higher level skills, with higher skills involving analytical and problem solving abilities (see: CBI, 2013: 6-7). The Quality Assurance Agency framework for Politics and International Relations degrees sets out a wide range of skills that PIR graduates should have. Summarising somewhat, these include:

- data gathering;

- analytical and synthesis skills;
- self-management and reflection on performance;
- awareness of ethical imperatives;
- communication skills, to different audiences;
- numeracy and IT skills;
- teamwork and collaboration (QAA, 2015: 12-13).³

This agenda has not gone unchallenged and is not universally accepted by social science academics. There have been a range of objections. Firstly, one criticism revolves around the perception that this agenda rejects the general norms and values of scholarship, replacing them with neo-liberal economic reasoning which is purely instrumental and turning University teaching into essentially vocational training (see: Bridges, 1993: 43; Chattopadhyay, 2013: 69-72; Souto-Otero, 2011: 294). University then becomes all about getting a good job, and as a consequence this agenda is ‘degrading the University system to a factory system’ (Chattopadhyay, 2013: 72).⁴ Secondly, there is the difficulty for lecturers of ‘how to teach the tools of an uncertain trade for use on an unknown job’ (Mason, 2002). In other words, the employment destinations of politics graduates are many and varied. The skills required of them will be equally varied. As Kemp and Seagraves (1995: 316) observe, skills demanded by employers are very context specific. Teaching staff must second-guess this, perhaps leading to difficulties between generic skills training and student awareness of the skills they have actually learned and can display (Nabi and Bagley, 1999: 187). This difficulty is compounded by the confusion of terms and skills identified above. Thirdly, and related, there is variation in how this agenda is delivered by lecturers, with different skills being tested, inconsistent assessment regimes and emphasis put on it by departments (Kemp and Seagraves, 1995: 327; Lee et al., 2014: 5).

Nonetheless, this agenda is only likely to gain in importance. While not denying difficulties, it is important to address and rebut some of these criticisms. While the term ‘employability’ is often used

in discussing this agenda, not least by government and external bodies such as business organisations, this is to misconceive, sometimes wilfully, the potential of this agenda for students and their academic development. Even if 'employability' terminology has to be used to justify to students why they have to undertake something unpopular like a research methods course, lecturers are actually engaged in much more than this. As Haigh and Kilmartin (1999: 203 *Italics added*) argue:

The development of personal transferable skills is a fundamental part of achieving most of that we consider essential to a good education. It is not merely about making students more employable. *It is about making them more capable.*

Alternatively, Druckman (2015: 35) argues that:

Education should do more than provide information/knowledge to students; rather it is incumbent upon instructors to ensure that students acquire the tools needed to address and resolve problems in a variety of domains.

In other words, and importantly, delivering transferable skills is also about making students better and more able scholars, surely something that no academic should oppose. From this perspective, employability may be one potential outcome, but it is not the chief nor most immediate aim of providing students with skills. Additional benefits also exist. There is a relationship between the explicit provision of such skills and higher levels of student motivation (D'Alosio, 2006). Clark (2011) additionally argues that active learning approaches to delivering transferable skills provides the higher and critical thinking skills evident in Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives. His evidence also suggests that such approaches can be important in increasing levels of student enjoyment of their learning experience. Explicit acknowledgement of skills during a module, in this case a research methods module, also shows how students can understand that their skills have been extended (Clark,

2011). Indeed, it may be that alumni testimony from such modules are a resource that lecturers may be able to tap into to help get these messages across.

How might transferable skills be taught in Politics and International Relations departments? Most obviously, this will be imparted through teaching and learning activities. In particular, the modules most likely to address transferable skills teaching are those which teach research methods. Often these are explicitly designed around this but, given the general unpopularity of research methods courses among politics students, emphasise the benefits in terms of employability, thereby tapping into student concerns (Clark, 2011). Such modules may be general research methods courses, but also involve quantitative research skills up to advanced levels, as well as more qualitative oriented courses. This may also involve the development of a pathway of linked modules providing increasingly advanced levels of skills (Clark, 2011). A related type of module is likely to involve the student doing an original, supervised research project, thereby learning valuable data collection and management skills. Many departments now also offer some form of internship or work-based learning placement. Typically, students are placed with an organisation, whether public or private sector, and expected to spend a certain amount of time there acting as a member of a team to deliver something useful for that organisation's goals. This is often justified as providing teamwork and self-management skills. In reality of course, such skills are not just provided by modules with such an obvious practical non-academic focus. Standard academic modules also provide many of these similar skills; good scholarship requires analytical and critical thinking skills, the ability to find, catalogue and interpret information, self-management and communication skills. Moreover, such modules may also have other skills embedded in them. Adriaensen et al., (2014) show how familiarity with numeracy and quantitative skills can be incorporated into non-methods course.

A further way of imparting skills is through modes of assessment. Indeed, Lee et al (2014: 8) suggest that there is a great deal of this in English PIR departments. Pennock (2011), for example, discusses

the benefits of incorporating assessed policy writing assignments in modules. These include helping students become better citizens and helping them meet the demands of the non-academic audiences they will have to engage with after graduation. Similarly, Maurer and Mawdsely (2014) highlight the use of policy-based modules in European Studies. They also point to an important method through which teamwork, negotiation and communication skills can be embedded. This is the use of simulations or role plays as an integral element of coursework. Typically, students will be asked to take the role of different political actor, to negotiate and present their case in a set area (see: Cowley and Stuart, 2015). Assessed group-based projects also test similar skills. Part of many modules is the ability to formally make a presentation to an audience, often of varying sizes. Sometimes this is used as formative assessment. It is also regularly incorporated into modules as an assessed piece of coursework. However assessed, this provides students with crucial presentation and public speaking skills and experience in a relatively safe environment where typically not much is at stake, something they will most likely have to do as part of professional life, and often to be offered a post in the first place. Finally, internships and work-based placements often require students to deliver a piece of work which is both academically sound and of use to their host organisation. Curtis (2012) highlights how even short-term placements can make a significant contribution towards enhancing student employability.

It should be stressed that there is clearly good work going on in politics departments in a range of these areas. For example, a small number of departments use their research methods teaching to give students not only the chance to work on an actual piece of research, but also to get it published. Thus, the Royal Holloway Group PR3710 and the LSE's GV314 have utilised research by a group of undergraduates to publish original research on a range of issues (GV314, 2012, 2014; Page, 2015; Royal Holloway Group PR3710, 2014). Other research methods modules explicitly emphasise skills and employability in order to underline the importance of these issues to sceptical students (Clark, 2011), and also in engaging with third sector organisations.⁵ Simulations and role plays are also used to

highlight a range of skills to students, such as negotiation and team working. Thus, one parliamentary studies module has a role-play element where students are, under the supervision of a former MP and chief whip, expected to negotiate and maintain party discipline in a parliamentary setting (Cowley and Stuart, 2014; 2015). In another University, students take the role of member states in the EU to understand more deeply how it works.⁶ The UK Political Studies Association have, on a number of occasions, rewarded efforts to impart transferable skills by awarding them their annual Innovation in Teaching Politics prize.⁷

In what follows, we expect to find evidence of departments incorporating transferable skills in both teaching practice and assessment. We also expect to find different types of modules emphasising skills to different extents. This variation is likely to manifest itself in such a way that methods, project and internship modules are more likely to emphasise skills, with more standard non-methodological academic modules placing skills less prominently among the potential learning outcomes.

Data

The method of data collection used for this audit of transferable skills teaching in UK politics/IR departments was a web-based analysis of online undergraduate module descriptions, accessed through university and departmental websites. This allowed us to assess to what extent transferable skills are being included in undergraduate teaching in the UK, in addition to which universities are advertising them to prospective undergraduate politics/IR students through their online module guides and what forms of transferable skills are being included. To qualify for inclusion in the dataset departments had to satisfy four requirements. Firstly they had to provide BA single honours undergraduate degrees in Politics, Political Studies, or Politics and/or with International Relations or Government. This was to focus as precisely as possible on the teaching of transferable skills specifically through stand-alone politics/IR degrees. Departments that only offered degrees in 'Politics and

French' or 'Politics with Economics' were not included. Secondly, detailed outlines of module content, teaching methods and assessment criteria had to be accessible online through departmental websites. Politics/IR degree webpages where there was no module information available, or very limited module information, were not included in the dataset. Thirdly, departments that do not structure their undergraduate degrees through a module-based format, such as Oxford and Cambridge, were therefore also not included. Lastly, each module needed to be active during the 2013/14 academic year.

In order to collect the data itself the webpage of each politics/IR module was subjected to a content analysis of the transferable skills, or opportunities to develop these skills, mentioned in the online module description. The skill area or teaching method searched for in the analysis of each module were 'Simulation/Role-playing', 'Quantitative skills', 'Research skills', 'Policy brief writing', 'Critical thinking', 'Communication skills', 'Presentation skills', and 'Writing skills'. Cognate terms under these broad categories were also accepted. Thus, terms such as 'thinking critically', 'critical thought', or 'communicating orally or in writing' would also have been categorised under these broad headings. As only one researcher coded the data, there were no issues of intercoder reliability, and any uncertainties regarding categorisation were discussed and agreed upon between the authors. In addition we also analysed each module to determine whether there were opportunities to develop transferable skills through internships, other forms of work experience, to study abroad or to take part in field trips. When a module description included one or more of these areas, this was recorded in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet alongside the module name, associated university and the stage at which it was taught. In total the dataset includes the above information collected from 1546 modules taught in 44 UK politics/IR departments during the 2013/14 academic year. In terms of university grouping, 18 departments in the sample are from the 'elite' Russell Group, 18 are pre-1992 universities and 8 are post-1992/University Alliance members. This sample is larger than the 25 English PIR departments

sampled by Lee et al (2014). It is also more geographically varied, including departments from across the UK. As a consequence, it helps expand knowledge in this area more broadly.

Analysis

In order to explore variation in the utilisation of transferable skills across UK Politics/IR departments we have analysed the module data from two perspectives. Firstly we have calculated the percentage of modules in which each transferable skill was explicitly mentioned as being incorporated through the module's teaching, content or assessment criteria. To explore the dataset further, we have also analysed it by dividing the modules along two themes. The first was to determine whether there was any noticeable variation between the utilisation of transferable skills between Politics/IR modules taught in English HEIs, compared with those delivered by Non-English HEIs departments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This is of interest because of the different fee structures between England and non-English HEIs. With English HEIs charging fees of £9,000 per annum, it might be expected that they place more of an emphasis on what students get and might achieve during their courses. Because of their relation to employability, emphasising skills may be one way of doing this. Non-English HEIs have either no or lesser fees, and thus might reasonably be expected to emphasise this less. The second theme was to do the same analysis for Politics/IR modules taught at Russell Group (RG) and Non-Russell Group (NRG) HEIs. This is an interesting dichotomy to explore as it is often assumed that NRG HEIs are more likely to include transferable skills within Politics/IR modules than RG HEIs, who tend to emphasise academic content instead (Lee et al, 2014). Finally, we have also briefly examined the stage that modules are presented in to take account of student progression through their degree programme. Table 1 outlines the number of modules in the sample from each group.

(Table 1 about here)

Table 2 breaks down the individual transferable skills drawn from the online module descriptions and reports the percentages of Politics/IR modules in the sample in which they were explicitly mentioned,

ranking these in order of prevalence within the dataset. In interview data collected by Lee et al (2014), 15/15 of HEIs represented in the sample noted engagement with many of the 'implicit skills' listed in Table 2. These include skills developed throughout the course of a Politics/IR degree, such as presentation and communication skills, in addition those gained through assessment mechanisms, for example report and policy brief writing. As Table 2 suggests, this research supports the conclusion that Politics/IR modules in the UK incorporate a wide range of transferable skills within their modules and programmes. However there are a number of areas in which their utilisation within modules themselves, as opposed to being 'engaged' with by departments as a whole, are perhaps surprisingly low.

(Table 2 about here)

As might be expected in a discipline which is largely essay and exam based in terms of assessment, writing skills were incorporated into 99.4% of the modules analysed. Modules advertising to students that they would develop 'critical thinking skills' were present in 48.7% of the module descriptions. Given the nature of a politics degree and the requirements of scholarship, this seems a surprisingly low percentage. That a greater proportion of modules in the sample did not mention the development of critical thinking skills could predominantly be the result of module descriptions being written with the assumption that the ability to produce critical thought, both orally in seminars and in written form through extended essays, is implicit in the Politics/IR degree the students have already chosen and therefore does not need to be explicitly stated. If so, departments may be underselling what they are offering students. Presentation skills (38.4%) and communication skills (38.4%) were more prevalent within the sample than research skills (29.3%) or modules that included some form of 'group work' or collaborative project (27.6%).

As Table 2 shows, away from these core areas or methods of incorporating transferable skills in Politics/IR modules, this research suggests teaching/assessment devices such as 'policy briefings' (1.8%) and 'Simulation/Role-play' exercises (3.5%) do not appear at present to be widely utilised as mechanisms for imparting transferable skills to students in UK Politics/IR. In terms of the proportion

of modules advertising some form of quantitative skill development, 4.1% did so in this sample. This suggests something like one explicit quantitative methods module per department, although given some departments are considerably stronger in this area than others, this is likely to misrepresent the picture. It indicates that efforts to embed such methods in the curriculum and in standard modules remains a considerable challenge. Indeed it is suggestive of the fact that some departments may actually have little or no provision in this area. This is likely to increase with the recent establishment of Q-Step Quantitative Methods Centres in 15 Universities across the UK, with Politics & IR departments involved in 12 of these centres. The key challenge for Politics and IR as a discipline is to extend this expertise beyond the departments traditionally strong in this area.

Many modules, of course, will not necessarily emphasise the above three skill areas. However, the low proportion of modules advertising the inclusion of these mechanisms for enhancing modules with transferable skills, skills valued by many employers, does suggest that there is room to both develop these more within Politics/IR modules in the UK, and also make greater efforts to advertise them to students. A similar situation is apparent in terms of the inclusion of Internships or work experience placements (1.9%), and opportunities to study abroad (3.4%). As Table 2 shows, only 10 modules (0.6%) in the sample advertised that there were opportunities to attend field trips or visits. This research therefore support others who have argued that the use of field trips within applicable subject areas, for example European Union studies, are significantly underutilised in Politics/IR departments (Roder, 2013).

Tables 3 and 4 present an analysis divided between the two categories of 'English/Non-English' and 'Russell Group/Non-Russell Group'. In the interests of clarity, only the seven most frequently mentioned skill areas are displayed in each table.

(Tables 3 & 4 about here)

In terms of both writing skills and critical thinking skills, this research finds little difference in the proportion of English HEI and Non-English HEIs modules incorporating these skills into their teaching assessment (99.6% and 48.8% and 99.6%, 48.3). However as Table 3 indicates, in each proceeding transferable skill category, (Presentation skills by 44.7% to 36.9%, communication skills by 53.5% to 32.7%, research skills by 36.2% to 27.5%, and group work/projects by 38.2% to 25.8%) non-English HEIs are more likely to explicitly mention these skill areas or opportunities than English HEIs. The differences between presentation and research skills in the two categories of institution are statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level.⁸ Taken together, these differences appear odd in relation to expectations about how fees might influence the practice of Universities in the two separate sectors. The only outlier in this regard is quantitative skills, with 4.4% of English HEI modules utilising this skill area compared to 2.6% of Non-English HEI modules. In areas such as internships/work experience (2.9% to 1.9%), simulation/role play (3.7% to 2.9%), policy brief writing (1.9% to 1.8%), studying abroad (3.2% to 2.2%) and field trips (both 0.6%), there is relatively little variation between English and Non-English Politics/IR modules.

Lee's (et al, 2014) research finds that a number of the 'elite' (Russell Group) and 'new' (Non-Russell Group) HEIs that responded to them do indeed incorporate transferable skills and assessment mechanisms such as policy brief writing and simulation/role-play exercises into their Politics/IR modules. This research however has drawn upon a broader and more in-depth dataset, which allows us to look more robustly at potential variations between Russell Group (RG) and Non-Russell Group (NRG) HEIs. Once again, and as Table 4 shows, there is essentially no variation between RG and NRG modules when it comes to writing skills (99.7% and 99.1%).

Clear differences however can be identified between RG and NRG HEIs when considering the next most frequently occurring transferable skills in the dataset. In terms of modules which mentioned critical thinking, 54.8% of RG modules utilise this transferable skill in comparison with 43.5% of NRG modules. As Table 4 shows, RG modules are also more likely to mention presentation skills (43.3% to

33.5%), communication skills (50.7% to 25.2%) and group/work projects (31.3% to 24.5%, a statistically significant difference at $p < .01$). Of the eight most frequently mentioned transferable skills, excluding writing, research skills are evenly split between RG and NRG modules (31.7% and 31.9%). As with English/Non-English modules, RG modules are slightly more likely to mention quantitative skills (4.4%) than NRG modules (3.4%).

For those transferable skill areas mentioned less frequently, there is little variation between RG and NRG HEIs. For example, policy brief writing was evident in 2.3% of RG modules and 1.4% of NRG modules. This finding is in contrast to other research in this area which identifies mechanisms such as policy brief writing as associated largely with NRG, 'new' HEIs (Lee et al, 2014). This pattern is also evident when we consider the use of simulation/role-play, where this research finds RG HEIs utilising this teaching and assessment tool to the same degree as NRG HEI (3.6% to 3.4%). This is another tool for enhancing transferable skills in Politics/IR students identified in previous research as more associated with NRG HEI (Lee et al, 2014). Similar proportions of RG and NRG modules mention internships/work experience (1.1% to 1.4%), studying abroad (3.3% to 2.7%) and field trips (both 0.5%).

These findings run contrary to previous research that has suggested that the transferable skills agenda is more prevalent with 'new' NRG departments, with RG Politics/IR departments emphasising academic content and the enhancement of research related skills. For example, Lee et al (2014:12) suggest that "New' HEIs appear to be preparing students for the world of work, while to some extent 'elite' institutions are preparing their students for postgraduate education'. While it may be true that more students from RG HEIs go on to study at postgraduate level, this research would suggest that this disparity between RG HEIs and NRG HEIs on transferable skills teaching is more evenly balanced than has previously been suggested, with RG modules in Politics/IR departments engaging extensively with skill sets associated with the transferable skills agenda. This research also finds that when considering the most frequently mentioned skill areas in the dataset (Table 4), Non-English HEI

modules are often more likely to refer to 'presentation' or 'communication' skills than modules taught in English HEIs. However, for the less commonly referred to skill areas, there is little variation between English and Non-English HEI modules.

(Table 5 about here)

It might also be expected that there is more emphasis on skills as students progress through their university career. Alternatively, it may be that skills are emphasised more in earlier compulsory courses, because these are likely to catch a higher number of students prior to module choice kicking in. Table 5 compares year 1 courses, which serve as a proxy for compulsory modules, with those offered in later years. This shows that with the exceptions of group work and, surprisingly, quantitative skills albeit from a very low base, all the other skills categories are more likely to be communicated in later years. However, as with the other analyses, there are still large differences with less than half in 2nd year and beyond mentioning critical thinking, under two-fifths mentioning either presentation or communication skills and less than a third mentioning research skills.

Conclusion

UK HEIs increasingly have to deal with the question of how transferable skills are taught to students. In part this is government driven, with governments in all parts of the UK pushing this agenda in the hope that economic growth will follow. However, given the advent of £9,000 fees in England, it is also something demanded by students themselves, and their parents. As any politics lecturer who has answered questions at a recruitment open day will know, this is an issue of considerable concern to those seeking to take non-vocational social science degrees.

This paper has presented an overview of how UK PIR departments communicate the delivery of transferable skills to their students through the main publicly available document that describes the modules students will undertake – the module guide or module description. The analysis is important because it both takes research into these issues further than previous work, in addition to pointing to potential for improvement. Most positively, it has suggested that there is much good, innovative, even prize-winning, work going on in this area. This is commendable and provides evidence to counter critics that PIR departments are seriously endeavouring, in a variety of modules, to provide students with the necessary skills.

However, it has also suggested that UK PIR departments are not particularly good at communicating these issues in publicly available module documentation to students. That only around half mention critical thinking skills, and less than two thirds mention presentation and communication skills, should be a worry to the discipline. Put simply, these are core academic skills that social science degrees confer. There is no dispute between academics about these particular skills. If the discipline cannot communicate these skills to students, it is little wonder that students fail to understand that they have them. The same applies to many of the other skills analysed. Indeed, the issue of how students understand the skills they are given is one ripe for further research. As it stands however, the discipline could do much more to tell students about what they are getting out of the politics modules they are studying.

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Table 1: Number of Modules by Region and HEI Group

		%
Modules from English HEIs	1240	80.2
Modules from Non-English HEIs	306	19.8
Modules from Russell Group HEIs	711	45.9
Modules from Non-Russell Group HEIs	835	54.0
N		1546

Source: HEI websites.

Table 2: Skills in module sample: Ranked highest to lowest (%)

	N	%
Writing Skills	1536	99.4
Critical Thinking	753	48.7
Presentation Skills	595	38.4
Communication Skills	570	36.8
Research Skills	453	29.3
Group Work/Projects	428	27.6
Quantitative Skills	63	4.1
Simulation/Role-Play	55	3.5
Study Abroad	47	3.4
Internships/Work Experience	30	1.9
Policy Brief Writing	29	1.8
Field Trips/Visits	10	0.6
N		1546

Table 3: Skills in module sample by English/Non-English HEI (%)

	English HEIs	Non-English HEIs
Writing Skills	99.4	99.6
Critical Thinking Skills	48.8	48.3
Presentation Skills	36.9**	44.7**
Communication Skills	32.7	53.5
Research Skills	27.5**	36.2**
Group Work/Projects	25.8	38.2
Quantitative Skills	4.4	2.6
N Modules	1240	306

Note: Statistically significant **p<.01; *p<.05

Table 4: Skills in module sample by Russell Group/Non-Russell Group HEI (%)

	Russell Group HEIs	Non-Russell Group HEIs
Writing Skills	99.7	99.1
Critical Thinking Skills	54.8	43.5
Presentation Skills	43.3	33.5
Communication Skills	50.7	25.2
Research Skills	31.7*	31.9*
Group Work/Projects	31.3**	24.5**
Quantitative Skills	4.7	3.4
N Modules	711	835

Note: Statistically significant **p<.01; *p<.05

Table 5: Skills in module sample by year taught (%)

	1st Year	2nd Year +
Writing skills	97.9	99.6
Critical Thinking skills	44.8	49.4
Presentation skills	33.1	39.4
Communication skills	35.2	37.1
Research skills	26.9	29.7
Group work / projects	31.1	27.4
Quantitative skills	5.4	3.9
N	241	1305

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² £9,000 p.a. undergraduate fees were introduced in England in 2011. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have different systems with either no or lower tuition fees. The implementation of (lower) fees predates the coalition government and were introduced by Labour.

³ It also includes inter-cultural skills and awareness.

⁴ Chattopadhyay's comments were made in regard to the Indian system, but similar views are held in the UK. See, for instance, Power (2015).

⁵ For example at Nottingham.

⁶ Newcastle

⁷ We are grateful to PSA for providing the citations for these prizes, which include LSE GV314 and Nottingham's Parliamentary Studies and research methods modules.

⁸ Chi-squared values calculated by individual cross-tabulations of each skills type with the independent variables, Russell Group/Non-Russell Group. English HEI/Non-English HEI and 1st year/other years. We would argue that even if the other results may be non-statistically significant, they are nonetheless substantively significant for the discipline.