POLITICS

Political Studies Association

POLITICS: 2009 VOL 29(3), 201–208

The Profession

The Policy Brief: Building Practical and Academic Skills in International Relations and Political Science

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The policy brief is an innovative and underutilised form of teaching, learning and assessment which provides undergraduate students with practical skills that translate directly into the workplace. This alternative to standard essays also challenges students to expand their research, writing and presentation skills. Further pedagogical advantages include assisting students in building personal development portfolios, improving internship programmes and making it difficult to plagiarise. International relations and political science curricula in the UK would benefit from the wider use of this tool.

Introducing the policy brief

Policy briefs are an innovative method of teaching, learning and assessment for undergraduate students pursuing a degree in international relations and political science, which appears to be underutilised in the UK. Our experience at Richmond, the American International University in London has demonstrated policy briefs to be a useful pedagogical tool. First, policy briefs contribute to meeting a key programme learning outcome of promoting transferable skills that translate directly into the workplace. Second, in completing policy brief assignments, students are required to exercise a range of academic abilities, including research, writing and presentation skills. Finally, additional advantages of policy briefs include assisting students in building personal development portfolios, improving internship programmes and addressing plagiarism issues. Although policy briefs are neither a panacea nor a replacement for in-depth essays, undergraduate programmes in political science and international relations in the UK could benefit from the wider use of policy briefs in the curriculum.

Policy briefs are an increasingly important part of the set of tools used for policy advocacy within government and by non-governmental organisations (Jones and Walsh, 2008; Miller, 1990; Stone, Maxwell and Keating, 2001, pp. 17–20). Private sector executives are also increasingly reliant on policy briefs, with many companies having departments of political or public affairs trying to influence, in particular, the regulatory function of the state (Anastasiadis, 2006).[1] Despite this, there are remarkably few academic resources to support the utilisation of policy briefs as a

learning tool. A small number of websites provide practical advice on policy brief writing; fewer still address their pedagogical usefulness.[2] Only one UK public policy textbook was found to contain a practical guide to 'producing briefs and submissions' (Miller, 1990, pp. 178–191).[3]

The rationale behind introducing policy briefs into the curriculum at Richmond reflects not only a desire to rectify this apparent oversight, but also our employment experiences. Neither of us was exposed to policy brief writing as an undergraduate, yet on both sides of the Atlantic we found this tool of policy advocacy critical in the workplace. Whether on Capitol Hill, writing policy briefs for members of Congress or the White House, or the UK Parliamentary All-Party Committee on International Development, which required the demonstration of policy brief writing skills as a precondition for employment, there was clearly a prima facie case for introducing this tool to undergraduates in international relations and political science.

Accordingly, we redesigned several modules, requiring students to write policy briefs in three of the 15 upper-division core modules in their major programme: in international relations *Politics of Development and Environment*, *Foreign Policy Analysis* and *American Foreign Policy* and in political science *Politics of Development and Environment*, *American Politics* and *Policymaking in a Globalised World*. In the US-style higher education system, this constitutes only a small fraction of the 40 modules required for graduation. The bulk of assessment takes place in more conventional forms (essays, examinations, presentations and a dissertation), as policy briefs are not intended to replace well-established methods of assessment that retain their own pedagogical value,[4] but to enhance the overall curriculum.

Policy briefs produced in the workplace are usually a response to specific requests from policymakers, or advocacy groups aiming to promote a particular policy option. These documents have a core aim: *to evaluate succinctly policy options on a specific issue for a specific policymaking audience*. The brevity of the document reflects the necessity for policymakers to operate under severe time constraints, since they may need to speak to the press or appear before a committee, and only have a short time period to digest information. The specific form will vary as it is tailored to the requirements of the recipient: President Carter was an acknowledged 'policy wonk' who sought detail on every aspect of each policy (Brzezinski, 1983, p. 64), while President Reagan requested the most succinct briefing papers (Andrew, 1995, p. 460).

A secondary requirement of the brief is *to make a policy recommendation and justify it*. This requirement reflects the need for policymakers to make practical decisions that are empirically supportable and logically defensible. Policy briefs are often produced in reaction to an emerging situation, generating a degree of urgency that influences the specific policy recommendations. The central objective of the brief is to *rationalise* these recommendations through consideration of the social, political and economic *consequences* of pursuing policy options, in terms of media coverage, popular opinion, budgets and relations with stakeholders.

Teaching and assessing policy briefs

In our endeavour to replicate real policy briefs in the classroom environment we introduce students to a simple, four-section structure: the *executive summary*, *situation brief*, *policy options/recommendation* and a list of *key sources*. The *executive summary* is essential as policy briefs are front-loaded; their conclusions are on the front page. It needs to convey succinctly the policies being advocated in a manner that commands the reader's attention. The *situation brief* that follows provides background material on the issue and establishes its significance. There is only room for essential facts, so information may be provided through images, trend data or a chronology of key events. This section also identifies *stakeholders*: the people, groups and organisations with an interest in the outcome of a policy debate.

The *policy options* section then identifies a series of alternatives for the policymaker to consider. This is the core of the document, where alternatives are outlined and evaluated while providing empirical supporting evidence. It is vital that the brief identifies a specific policymaker and the organisation to which they belong, as this will influence how options are evaluated and the final recommendation. For policy evaluations and recommendations to be coherent, the policymaker's existing position must be clarified and recommendations must be either normatively or pragmatically acceptable to them. Policy options need to be credible, and the most obvious ideas, as well as the default option of continuing with existing policy, should be evaluated. As the brief is not an essay, policy evaluations in bullet points, clearly outlining the strengths and weaknesses of each policy position, may be preferred. The policy position outlined in the *executive summary* is then expanded, explained and rationalised in the *policy recommendation* section in an effort to convince the reader of its validity. Finally, an annotated section of *key sources* details where key information on the topic can be accessed.

As the brief is a practical tool for policymaking, it needs to be empirically grounded, providing realistic evaluations and actionable recommendations. The brief must be succinct and accessible, avoiding technical, legalistic, economic or indeed academic jargon. It should also facilitate readability through a range of tools: images, layout choices and the provision of data in interesting forms (graphs or charts) to help convey crucial information. As the brief is designed to replicate a document in the public realm, it must have a professional appearance: numbered pages and correct spelling and grammar. To assist our students, we have a website dedicated to the writing of policy briefs which includes a set of writing samples.[5]

It is usual for policy brief writing to be linked to policy presentations at Richmond. Students produce a brief and then 'pitch' it to the class as if to the selected policymaker target, outlining their policy recommendation and justifying their position. Through this process students demonstrate background knowledge, control of their subject matter and a degree of competency regarding the policy issues. This combines the rigour of a viva situation with the context of role play, as faculty adopt the role of the policymaker they have selected as their target when interrogating the practical, normative and pragmatic dimensions of the policy recommendation. The pedagogical usefulness of the policy brief in the study of American politics in particular can be seen in this 'role playing' and 'personalised participation' method. Following Robert Singh (2001, pp. 133–134), this method

can help overcome problems with teaching this subject in the UK, combating a misguided sense of familiarity students sometimes have regarding American politics and culture.

As the policy brief is assessed differently from an essay, a separate 'criteria marking reference sheet' is used to provide formal feedback to students. Three core areas for assessment are identified: research, presentation and policy analysis. Research is presented in a full, annotated bibliography and students are expected to use a range of appropriate contemporary sources, with the format following standard criteria for essays. Presentation requires professionalism, readability and accessibility, the demonstration of succinct writing skills and a structure following the four-point model set out above. Policy analysis entails the evaluation of strengths and weaknesses of each option from the perspective of the target policymaker. Students must also make a policy recommendation that is acceptable to this target on pragmatic or normative grounds. Students have the opportunity to defend their analysis and recommendation when they pitch the brief, and they are explicitly examined on this point. The policy brief and pitch together usually comprise 30 per cent of the final module grade. The relevant QAA benchmark statements on assessment are broad enough to support this approach (QAA, 2009a, 4.8–4.9).

At Richmond, policy briefs are used only in 300-level, upper division modules, roughly equivalent to second-year modules in a three-year undergraduate degree system. Learning outcomes assessed through policy briefs in these modules include practical skills and integration, and are set out in module syllabuses. Integration is the indicator of progression at the 300 level, with students expected to be building upon their studies in international relations and political science at the lower division. The stated outcome is that 'Students will have significantly extended their ability for critical analysis and independent research. They will show a consistent ability to present rational, thoughtful and well-supported arguments'. For practical skills: 'Students will produce a policy brief, addressing a practical and contemporary issue relevant to course content, written for a specific policy audience'. Policy briefs are designed to help students achieve these learning outcomes, and overall assessment of policy briefs takes place in this context.

Practical and academic skill building

It is normal for students in international relations and political science to have normative views on important contemporary issues. The policy brief allows them to develop these views through the advocacy of specific policy measures, as they might otherwise not be explicitly encouraged to do. As they are required to tailor these measures to a specific policymaker, they must develop these views into coherent, broader claims in support of particular policy measures. In our experience, students respond well when asked to make a normative, ethical or pragmatic decision concerning policy recommendations. Further, while the ability to think critically, evaluate, analyse, research, write and present is usually deemed more important than developing practical experience of policy advocacy, these academic skills are also developed in the process of writing policy briefs.

Policy briefs help in meeting the programme learning outcome of promoting 'Transferable Skills and Attributes: Practical Skills (which translate directly into the

workplace)' for international relations and political science students at Richmond (Moon, 2000; Open University, 2005; QAA, 2009a, 3.1(5); RAIUL/OUVS, 2008). Policy briefs supplement presentations and internship opportunities in providing skills that will be necessary for graduates going on to work in, among others, government ministries, political parties, NGOs, think-tanks, the private sector, charities or public relations. Learning policy brief writing skills therefore is one way in which students can develop practical skills prior to graduation.

While a policy brief is not a standard research essay, it requires specific research skills because it usually focuses on a contemporary issue. The online media is an important source of information, but critical scholarly judgement is required to make appropriate use of this material. Researching a policy brief must also go beyond this to other sources of information: policy documents, political speeches and critical commentary from interest groups. The stakeholders in the issue may have expressed their views in various ways, and transcripts of expert testimony may be available online. Students can develop research skills as well as building critical thinking skills through this process.

Through policy brief writing, students can also begin to address the complex relationship between researchers and policymakers, and build a clearer image of the constraints that policymakers face. In this context, public policy scholars have suggested that researchers begin to utilise better communication and dissemination strategies, including writing in a manner more accessible to policymakers (Stone, Maxwell and Keating, 2001, pp. 17–18). Students can begin to 'bridge' the gap between research and policymaking, and directly investigate the implications of this in modules on the public policy process.

The multiplicity of possible career paths for students further increases the salience of teaching diverse styles of writing. Students are less likely to find an occupation requiring the production of 5,000-word essays, and more likely to find one requiring the production of reports, press releases or policy briefs. Producing international relations and political science graduates only experienced in writing essays and exams therefore seems limiting. Through the policy brief students are exposed to different styles of writing, helping graduates to adapt to workplace requirements.

Further pedagogical considerations

The limitations of policy briefs must also be recognised. The short, sharp, concise nature of the brief, with its focus on presentation, might be construed as the elevation of style over substance. Briefs are never going to address epistemological and ontological questions that concern the discipline (see Bates and Jenkins, 2007), and will certainly lack the theoretical depth of good undergraduate essays. To reiterate, however, the academic skills and practical experience gained by students through policy brief assignments is designed to supplement, rather than replace, existing methods of teaching, learning and assessment. Furthermore, the positive aspects of the policy brief potentially extend to addressing plagiarism, improving internship programmes and assisting students in building personal development portfolios.

Following the 1997 *Dearing Report* (recommendation 20) (Dearing, 1997), all international relations and political science majors are required to build a personal

development portfolio, designed to promote self-learning as well as to provide materials that could be presented to potential employers (QAA, 2009b, pp. 6–7). However, the subject-specific nature of portfolios requires greater clarification (Moir et al., 2008). In this regard, concise policy briefs dealing with contemporary issues and of direct relevance to employers appear to be well suited to portfolio development for students in political science and international relations.

A further rationale for policy brief assignments results from Richmond's internship programme, which places students in a variety of work settings that demand the production of these documents. The work students have been asked to complete in the classroom is proving to be an invaluable learning tool with real-world applications. One student has written policy briefs during internships with both the American Embassy in London and the US Office at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Using policy briefs to facilitate practical skill building for the workplace therefore dovetails with efforts to ensure that political internships are an effective use of a student's time and energy (Curtis et al., 2009, pp. 62–70).

The policy brief is intended as an interesting and engaging assignment of practical relevance, which can help to overcome 'the spoon-feeding expectations of students' (Andretta, 2006, p. 13). Success is reflected not only in the examples of student internships, but also through the generally excellent formal feedback received from students in modules utilising policy briefs. In informal feedback students express particular support for the practical aspects of the assignment. They also note that the brief takes a significant amount of work to do well, and is not seen as a soft assignment. Positive feedback has also been received from our external examiners regarding our introduction of policy briefs into the curriculum.

As the brief is focused on contemporary events and requires a recommendation to be justified, the very nature of its content makes plagiarism all the harder to disguise. The fact that the brief is not written in standard essay form also makes it difficult for students to plagiarise using previously written work. Furthermore, the requirement for students to pitch their brief makes it apparent whether they are able to understand their own recommendations. Students can therefore demonstrate ownership of their work, an important process in the fight against plagiarism.

Our political science and international relations major programmes derive their teaching, learning and assessment strategies from the current QAA benchmark statements, which reflect best practice in a continually innovating discipline. Policy briefs should be evaluated within the discipline in this context. Although not a panacea, we have argued here that the specific approach necessary for researching, writing and presenting policy briefs, and their widespread utilisation in the public, private and NGO sectors, makes them a useful tool for improving students' academic and practical skills. Potential usefulness in assisting students with their careers, in building personal development portfolios, in improving internship programmes and in fighting plagiarism also suggests that this method is worth further consideration. At Richmond, policy briefs have enhanced our curriculum as well as our teaching, learning and assessment strategy. If policy brief writing became a more widely accepted practice in undergraduate teaching in the UK, it could contribute to developing the skills required by high-quality graduates in international relations and political science.

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Notes

The authors are grateful to Nuria Okfen and Carly Beckerman for their editorial assistance, Chris Leiter and Iain Padley for their practical contribution, the external examiners for our international relations and political science programmes for their comments and the anonymous reviewers for their detailed and useful feedback. The usual disclaimers apply.

1 See for example: http://www.cbi.org.uk/ndbs/staticpages.nsf/staticpages/policymatrix.htm?OpenDocument.

2 The most useful material can be found at:
http://www.rhsupplies.org/fileadmin/user_upload/toolkit/B_Advocacy_for_RHS/Guidelines_for_Writing_a_Policy_Brief.pdf
http://www.policy.hu/ipf/fel-pubs/samples/PolicyBrief-described.pdf
http://www.courses.psu.edu/hpa/hpa301_fre1/IBInstructions_fa02.PDF
http://www.gse.buffalo.edu/Fas/Jacobson/629/webnotes/policy_brief.htm
http://sobek.colorado.edu/~salucci/teaching/teaching_portfolio/assets/Policy_Brief_instructions.pdf
http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Tools/Toolkits/Communication/Writing_policy_papers.html
http://rooseveltinstitution.org/publications/legbriefs

3 All these sources are worth examining as they provide alternative structures and assessment sheets for policy briefs. In some modules we also ask students to provide briefs with additional sections, such as potential witnesses to congressional or parliamentary hearings, and a set of accompanying questions for these witnesses. See also Burow et al. (2007).

4 The APSA website provides an extensive academic literature on the pedagogical virtues of different forms of assessment: http://www.apsanet.org/content_62698.cfm

5 See: http://www.richmond.ac.uk/resources/library/Subject_Resources/Politics/Policy_briefs/Policy_briefs.asp

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