

Politics and International Relations

Subject benchmark statements

Subject benchmark statements provide a means for the academic community to describe the nature and characteristics of programmes in a specific subject. They also represent general expectations about the standards for the award of qualifications at a given level and articulate the attributes and capabilities that those possessing such qualifications should be able to demonstrate.

This subject benchmark statement, together with the others published concurrently, refers to the ***bachelors degree with honours***.

Subject benchmark statements are used for a variety of purposes. Primarily, they are an important external source of reference for higher education institutions when new programmes are being designed and developed in a subject area. They provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with the programme but are not a specification of a detailed curriculum in the subject. Benchmark statements provide for variety and flexibility in the design of programmes and encourage innovation within an agreed overall framework.

Subject benchmark statements also provide support to institutions in pursuit of internal quality assurance. They enable the learning outcomes specified for a particular programme to be reviewed and evaluated against agreed general expectations about standards.

Finally, subject benchmark statements are one of a number of external sources of information that are drawn upon for the purposes of academic review* and for making judgements about threshold standards being met. Reviewers do not use subject benchmark statements as a crude checklist for these purposes however. Rather, they are used in conjunction with the relevant programme specifications, the institution's own internal evaluation documentation, together with primary data in order to enable reviewers to come to a rounded judgement based on a broad range of evidence.

The benchmarking of academic standards for this subject area has been undertaken by a group of subject specialists drawn from and acting on behalf of the subject community. The group's work was facilitated by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, which publishes and distributes this statement and other benchmarking statements developed by similar subject-specific groups.

The statement represents the first attempt to make explicit the general academic characteristics and standards of an honours degree in this subject area, in the UK.

In due course, but not before July 2003, the statement will be revised to reflect developments in the subject and the experiences of institutions and academic reviewers who are working with it. The Agency will initiate revision and, in collaboration with the subject community, will establish a group to consider and make any necessary modifications to the statement.

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* academic review in this context refers to the Agency's new arrangements for external assurance of quality and standards. Further information regarding these may be found in the ***Handbook for Academic Review***, which can be found on the Agency's web site.

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Southgate House
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Fax 01452 557070
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Academic standards - Politics and International Relations

Introduction

i. The background to the Statement that follows lies in a consultation paper entitled Developing the Quality Assurance and Standards Framework for UK Higher Education. It was not the intention of the QAA to identify something like a national curriculum in terms of the content of a degree in a given subject. This remains a matter of academic freedom. Rather, the QAA advocated the development of 'benchmark information on subject threshold standards' which articulates the abilities and skills expected of honours graduates in different subjects.

ii. The purpose of such information is to assist:

- higher education institutions in designing and approving programmes of study; external examiners and academic reviewers in verifying and comparing standards;
- where appropriate, professional bodies in their accreditation and review of programmes relating to professional competence;
- students and employers when seeking information about higher education provision and levels of attainment expected of graduates.

iii.a These purposes are relevant to a large number of students of Politics and International Relations and a wide range of employers. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, there were, in 1997-98, 11,074 students of Politics and International Relations on full-time undergraduate programmes and 1,026 on part-time programmes in the UK. Most were normally domiciled in the UK, 789 being from other EU countries and 418 from elsewhere in the world. In the same year, 3,247 students of Politics and International Relations graduated. Of the 3,213 known results, 55.5% of degrees awarded were upper-second, 35.5% were lower-second, 4.1% were firsts, 4.0% were in the third-class/pass category and 0.9% were unclassified.

iii.b The known destinations of 1,457 students who entered employment upon graduation range across most of the categories in the Standard Industrial Classifier of Employer. The largest proportion of Politics and International Relations graduates entered into: property, renting, business and research activities (22.2%); public administration (15.4%); and financial activities (13.4%). Others went into: the retail/repair trade (10.3%); manufacturing (8.9%); other community, social and personal service activities (6.9%); transport, storage and communications (5.6%); health and social work (4.9%); education (4.5%); hotels and restaurants (3.2%); electricity/gas/water supply (1.4%); construction (1.3%); mining and quarrying (0.8%); and international organizations (0.2%). The Standard Occupational Classification shows that most entry occupations in 1998 were: clerical and secretarial (29.1%); managers and administrators (28.8%); associate professional and technical (13.5%); sales occupations (8.1%); professional (7.5%); and personal and protective services (6.6%).

iv. The Benchmark Statement is arranged under QAA standardized headings. It focuses on six major aspects concerning the nature of Politics and International Relations and programmes leading to honours degrees:

- Its defining principles acknowledge the breadth and diversity of Politics and International Relations.
- With that flexible context in mind, it sets out the nature and extent of the subject.
- It outlines the possible content of degree programmes and their aims.
- It sets out the skills that may be expected of honours graduates under three headings; knowledge and understanding of the subject; generic intellectual skills; and personal transferable skills.
- It outlines different forms of teaching, learning and assessment - and their purposes.
- It [and Table 1] sets out levels of achievement to be expected from students performing to threshold and typical standards.

v. The Statement addresses: single honours programmes in Politics, International Relations or both; and joint honours programmes in which Politics and/or International Relations comprise at least half of the curriculum leading to a degree. The Statement is intended to provide a broad framework within which providers can develop programmes that respond to the needs of students and which, at the same time, acknowledges the diversity of approaches to Politics and International Relations. As emphasized in paragraphs 1.1 to 1.3 and 3.1(1), it is not the purpose of the Statement to impose on institutions a set of rigid conditions that would stifle intellectual diversity or innovation in programme development and the design of learning experiences. All that is hoped is that the Statement will make a contribution to the definition of 'graduatness' in Politics and International Relations and the maintenance of degree standards.

1. Defining principles

1.1 The scope of Politics and International Relations is broad, the boundaries often being contested or in movement. Thus, departments have a variety of names. They may be called Departments of Government, Politics, Political Science, International Politics, International Relations, International Studies, or some combination of these. Different names may reflect different nuances adopted in degree programmes or the extent to which both aspects of the discipline are taught in conjunction with one another.

1.2 Politics and International Relations reach out to other disciplines such as anthropology, cultural studies, economics, sociology, geography, history, law or literature. Thus, programmes in Departments of Politics and International Relations or International Studies usually include courses in other social sciences and humanities. While many programmes are primarily social scientific in approach, some are on the cusp of the social sciences and humanities.

1.3 Politics and International Relations may be taught in a variety of academic settings. Examples, of which there might be many more, include: public administration taught in Schools of Management under the title of public sector management; political philosophy in Philosophy departments; and the history of political thought in History departments. Degrees in Peace or War Studies or in Conflict Studies cut across conventional knowledge-based categories and their distinctive approaches to understanding and skills may need to draw on a wider range of materials and resources, including other benchmark standards to capture fully the specific character of their particular degree programmes.

1.4. The labelling of approaches within Politics and International Relations and the scope of associated areas of study are also contestable [2.2 and 2.5]. This point and those at 1.1, therefore, indicate that this Benchmarking Statement itself might be regarded as transient. What follows is intended to be broad enough for a diversity of nuances, approaches and relationships with other disciplines to be expressed. In other words, specific references below to approaches, areas of study and courses are indicative rather than comprehensive, exclusive or prescriptive. They should be read in the context of the characteristic general approaches and the specialisms of each department.

2. Nature and extent of the subject

2.1(1). Politics is concerned with developing a knowledge and understanding of government and society. The interaction of people, ideas and institutions provides the focus to understand how values are allocated and resources distributed at many levels, from the local through to the sectoral, national, regional and global. Thus analyses of who gets what, when, how, why and where are central, and pertain to related questions of power, justice, order, conflict, legitimacy, accountability, obligation, sovereignty and decision-making. Politics encompasses philosophical, theoretical, institutional and issue-based concerns relating to governance.

2.1(2). International Relations shares the concerns of Politics, but its focus is the regional and global arenas. Traditionally preoccupied with anarchy (the absence of international or global government), the conflictual and co-operative engagement between states, International Relations is increasingly concerned with engagement between states, intergovernmental organizations and non-state actors such as transnational corporations and transnational civil society groups. As with the study of Politics, the study of International Relations encompasses philosophical, theoretical, institutional and issue-based concerns relating to governance, but at the regional and global levels.

2.2. The study of Politics and International Relations involves the description of political phenomena, which we try to explain using general theories and on which we reflect normatively. Normative political theory or political philosophy concerns the normative study of the political values of society and the international order, investigated both historically and analytically. Positive political theory or explanatory political theory concerns the study of the general mechanisms and forces which steer the behaviour of individuals and institutions as they interact at domestic, regional and global levels to allocate values and resources. Political science or political analysis uses these theoretical perspectives to inform and assess the explanation of historical events, political behaviour, the workings of political institutions and actors, political processes and the policy outputs of governance and regulatory structures.

2.3. The study of Politics and International Relations uses a series of research strategies and methods, the range employed varying according to purpose. These could include textual analysis, historical research, use of contemporary media sources, discourse analysis, elite interviews, mass surveys, statistical modelling, deductive modelling, and computer simulation techniques. Politics and International Relations also draw upon the knowledge bases of cognate disciplines.

2.4. The study of Politics and International Relations is both implicitly comparative and characterized by explicitly comparative investigations across time and space. Explaining the causes of an event or the workings of an institution involves asking questions about what might have happened under different conditions.

2.5. There are a number of approaches and areas of investigation in Politics and International Relations. These approaches cross-fertilize each other both methodologically and in subject matter; therefore certain topics may appear under more than one heading. Each has its own lines of debate and methodological disputes. Approaches may be competitive or complement each other. Debate within and between them has the effect of advancing knowledge and understanding. They may include:

- Within normative political theory or political philosophy primarily but not exclusively: conceptual analysis, historical textual analysis, rational choice and analytical political philosophy, liberalism, Marxist and neo-Marxist approaches, environmentalism, human rights, feminism, multiculturalism, relativism, postmodernism, classical realism, neo-realism, conservatism, nationalism.
- Within positive political theory or explanatory political theory primarily but not exclusively: behaviouralism, comparative methods, game theory, institutionalism, political economy, political sociology, postmodernism, rational or public choice, social choice theory, cultural theory, critical theory, pluralism.
- Within political science or political analysis primarily but not exclusively: international organizations, regimes, legislatures, executives, party systems, electoral systems, voting behaviour, public policy, public administration or public management, political communication, political development, urban politics, conflict analysis, peace research, human rights, foreign policy analysis, area studies, security studies, international law, international economic relations.

3.1. Subject knowledge and understanding

3.1(1) Perhaps in no other academic discipline are the subject matter and approaches so much in contention and in flux. The present state of the discipline is the result of curiosity, free inquiry and debate and its future will be driven by the same forces. It is therefore not the intention of this section to lay out a 'national curriculum' for Politics and International Relations. All that can be asked of institutions is that they should continue to develop their teaching and research: and to offer to their students a curriculum which is founded on the discipline as it has developed to date; which reflects their particular approach to the discipline; and which draws on their specialist strengths. Bearing this in mind, it should be noted that exemplary lists below should be treated as such, and not accorded any other status.

3.1(2) *Contents of Politics and/or International Relations degree*

3.1(2)(a) A single honours graduate in Politics will have experienced a curriculum which takes elements from political theory (normative and positive) and from political analysis/political science [see 2.2], and will have been introduced to the use of comparative and/or historical analysis in the study of the discipline. To the extent that it is necessary, the curriculum will introduce appropriate research methods and methodologies.

3.1(2)(b) Joint or combined honours Politics students cannot be expected to engage the subject with the breadth and depth expected of the single-honours student but, given this qualification, the curriculum should similarly expose them to elements of normative and/or positive political theory and elements of political analysis/political science.

3.1(2)(c) The distinction between political theory (normative and positive) and political analysis/political science, maintained above for reasons of clarity, may well not be so maintained in teaching where, for example, theoretical considerations might appropriately be raised in courses dealing with essentially empirical material or, conversely, empirical cases might be raised in essentially theoretical courses.

3.1(2)(d) Thus, political theory could be taught as, for example: traditional political thought, modern democratic thought, ethics, urban theories, integration theory. It could also be taught in courses on: feminism, race, comparative politics, or in free-standing single country studies. The intention of this formulation is that there should be no specification of the theory that students should be exposed to, or where it might appear in the curriculum - simply that they should be exposed to theory.

3.1(3)(a) A single-honours graduate in International Relations will have experienced a curriculum which incorporates elements of international political theory and of international political analysis. A single honours programme in International Relations generally aims to communicate the character of world politics from both the system and actor perspectives. It includes the historical evolution of international systems and of global power structures. The main foci in terms of agency are states and international organizations, and transnational actors.

3.1(3)(b) Joint or combined honours International Relations students cannot be expected to engage the subject with the breadth and depth expected of the single honours student but, given this qualification, the curriculum should similarly expose them to elements of theory and elements of analysis.

3.1(3)(c) International political theory could be taught as contending approaches such as realism, neo-realism, neo-liberalism, institutionalist theory, feminism, pluralism, Marxism or critical theory; it could also be taught as normative theory. Theory may also form some part of courses such as foreign policy, international organization, international history, peace studies, human rights, gender or arms control.

3.1(3)(d) International political analysis embraces the categories of global, sectoral and regional studies and often explores the interface of domestic and international politics. For example, courses might examine transnational corporations, environmental or financial politics, or the study of a particular region. As with Politics, International Relations has an important comparative and historical dimension which might be represented in courses on for example, diplomacy, foreign policy, international order or area studies.

3.1(4)(a) In the teaching of political analysis/science and international relations the term 'comparative and historical analysis' embraces the categories of cross-national studies, area studies and single-country studies, and acknowledges the importance of these approaches to the discipline.

3.1(4)(b) Research methods and methodologies in Politics and International Relations include the use of information retrieval techniques, quantitative methods, research design and the use of information technology. Their weight and character cannot be prescribed except to say that these should be determined in the light of the requirements of the particular curriculum being taught.

3.1(5) *Aims of degree programmes in Politics and International Relations*

Undergraduate programmes in Politics and International Relations aim to:

- place questions of political and international order and decision-making at the centre of analysis;
- ensure that students of politics and international relations acquire knowledge and understanding in appropriate areas of theory and analysis;
- enable students to understand and use the concepts, approaches and methods of their discipline and develop an understanding of their contested nature and the problematic character of inquiry in the discipline;
- develop in students a capacity to think critically about events, ideas and institutions;
- encourage students to relate the academic study of politics to questions of public concern;
- assist students to develop a range of cognitive and social skills relevant to their intellectual, vocational and personal development;
- provide a curriculum supported by scholarship, staff development and a research culture that promotes breadth and depth of intellectual enquiry and debate;
- create a learning environment that is receptive to the needs and views of students and encourages them to achieve their full potential.

3.2. Subject skills and other skills

3.2(1) Graduates in Politics and International Relations will be able to demonstrate a wide range of abilities and skills. These may be divided into three categories: (a) knowledge and understanding of the subject; (b) generic intellectual skills and; (c) personal transferable skills.

3.2(1)(a) *Knowledge and understanding of the subject*

Graduates in Politics will be able to:

- understand the nature and significance of politics as a human activity;
- apply concepts, theories and methods used in the study of politics to the analysis of political ideas, institutions and practices;
- demonstrate knowledge and understanding of different political systems, the nature and distribution of power in them; the social, economic, historical and cultural contexts within which they operate, and the relationships between them;
- evaluate different interpretations of political issues and events.

Graduates in International Relations will be able to:

- understand the nature and significance of politics as a global activity;
- apply concepts, theories and methods used in the study of international relations to the analysis of political ideas, practices and issues in the global arena;
- demonstrate a knowledge and understanding of the origins and evolution of the international political system, including contemporary changes underway;
- evaluate different interpretations of world political events and issues.

3.2(1)(b) ***Generic intellectual skills***

Graduates in Politics and International Relations will be able to:

- gather, organize and deploy evidence, data and information from a variety of secondary and some primary sources;
- identify, investigate, analyse, formulate and advocate solutions to problems;
- construct reasoned argument, synthesize relevant information and exercise critical judgement;
- reflect on their own learning and seek and make use of constructive feedback;
- manage their own learning self-critically.

3.2(1)(c) ***Personal transferable skills***

Graduates in Politics and International Relations will be able to:

- communicate effectively and fluently in speech and writing;
- use communication and information technology for the retrieval and presentation of information, including, where appropriate, statistical or numerical information;
- work independently, demonstrating initiative, self-organization and time-management;
- collaborate with others to achieve common goals.

4. Teaching, learning and assessment

4.1 Teaching and learning methods are designed and deployed to:

- meet the aims and objectives of the course and/or programme;
- foster knowledge of and enthusiasm for the subject;
- stimulate engagement and participation in the learning process;
- encourage deep rather than surface learning by students;
- encourage students to reflect on and take responsibility for their own learning;
- take account of the different circumstances and needs of students.

4.2 Forms of teaching include an appropriate balance drawn from amongst the following:

- lectures, seminars, tutorials and workshops;
- whole group, small group and individual teaching;
- student-led and tutor-led sessions;
- skills-based, discussion-based and knowledge-based classes;
- tutor-student interaction including face-to-face communication, communication via information technology and, in some cases, by means of specially designed learning materials.

4.3. A combination of these allows students to develop a range of skills. These include: presenting an overview of a topic, encouraging skills of concentration, note-taking, sifting information. The use of case studies within seminars can encourage the application of knowledge to real life situations, independent learning, group co-operation, imagination and original thinking, all of which enable students to demonstrate the skills identified at 3.2.

4.4. Student learning takes place in a variety of settings including scheduled meetings of tutors and students, self-directed study time and preparation for and feedback from assessment. Student development may also include experiential learning [see 4.6].

4.5. In undergraduate programmes in Politics and International Relations, students learn through:

- speaking, listening, reading and writing;
- engagement with printed, oral, broadcast and electronic sources;
- group and individual work;
- observation, participation and reflection.

4.6. Students of Politics and International Relations are expected to use a range of the following learning methods:

- critical reading of a wide range of texts including documents, monographs, scholarly articles, statistics, newspapers, textbooks and sources on the internet;
- independent research using both primary and/or secondary sources and appropriate methods of enquiry;
- group discussion for communicating ideas and presenting own work in a variety of formats, including, for example, debates, case studies, role play, simulations;
- contact with political actors through visits, speakers, websites and, in some cases, experiential learning such as internships, placements or action research in the UK or abroad.

4.7. Assessment methods are designed to:

- meet the aims and objectives of the course and/or programme;
- promote students' learning;
- be capable of being used for diagnostic, formative and summative purposes;
- be valid, reliable and fairly administered;
- allow students to demonstrate their learning according to explicit and transparent assessment criteria;
- provide appropriate opportunities for constructive feedback.

4.8. Forms of assessment could include an appropriate balance of the following:

- essays, seen and unseen exams, book reviews, reports, dissertations;
- oral and written assignments;
- group and individual work;
- tutor-directed and student-directed tasks;
- work completed under controlled or time-constrained conditions and work completed in self-directed study time;
- tutor, peer and self assessment.

4.9. Different forms of assessment test different skills and abilities. Commonly, these include the ability: to digest and précis a range of sources; to use wide-ranging knowledge; to demonstrate a grasp of concepts; to structure logical answers; to apply theories to cases; to mount a reasoned argument, draw conclusions and communicate these effectively in speech and writing. Forms of assessment may also test the capacity to organize work and perform under acute time and resource constraints; or, to master a text, to analyse argumentation and to use specific examples. A final year dissertation, thesis or extended essay assesses the ability to research independently.

5. Standards and levels of achievement

5.1. The achievement of honours graduates in Politics and International Relations is described in terms of the three areas of performance identified at 3.2(1)(a)-(c): knowledge and understanding; generic intellectual skills; and personal transferable skills.

5.2. Student achievement is expressed in terms of learning outcomes on the successful completion of an honours degree programme [Table 1]. The benchmark statements are sufficiently broad to encourage institutions to develop undergraduate programmes that reflect the diverse and changing nature of Politics and International Relations. They do not specify the curriculum content, learning methods, nor mode of study by which the student is enabled to achieve these outcomes. In this respect, some of the learning outcomes could be achieved by prior learning that is accredited as part of a degree programme or through flexible modes of attendance.

5.3. Although students will be required to demonstrate the appropriate level of attainment in each of the stated areas of performance, they need not necessarily cover all the learning outcomes outlined in Table 1; these will vary according to the nature and purpose of individual programmes. However, the curriculum design and learning opportunities should be appropriate to each stage of the programme and give students the opportunity to attain the required standards in each area of performance.

5.4. Table I identifies the criteria for the threshold and typical levels of achievement. The former describes in positive terms the minimally acceptable honours graduate (bottom of the Third Class honours degree classification); the latter describes the level of achievement attained by the majority of graduates, on the boundary between a Lower and Upper Second Class honours degree.

Table 1: Example of typical and threshold levels of achievement in Politics and International Relations.

On the successful completion of an honours degree programme in Politics/International Relations, students should be able to:

| | <i>Typical</i> | <i>Threshold</i> |
|------------------------------------|--|--|
| <i>Knowledge and understanding</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate a familiarity and engage critically with the nature and significance of politics or international relations, including: definitions of the boundaries of the political; the contested nature of knowledge and understanding; approaches to the study of politics or international relations; a range of key concepts, theories and methods employed in the study of politics or international relations; and the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches. • Demonstrate a familiarity and engage critically with (international) politics and political phenomena, including: the normative and positive foundations of political ideas; the vocabulary of political debate; the structure and operation of different (international) political systems; the social, economic, historical and cultural contexts of political behaviour; and the factors accounting for political change. • Apply different concepts, theories and methods to the analysis of political ideas, institutions and behaviour. • Examine and evaluate different interpretations of political issues and events. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe and illustrate the nature of politics or international relations, including: definitions of the boundaries of the political; the contested nature of knowledge and understanding; approaches to the study of politics or international relations; and key concepts, theories and methods employed in the study of politics or international relations. • Describe and illustrate (international) politics and political phenomena, including: the normative and positive foundations of political ideas; the vocabulary of political debate; the structure and operation of different (international) political systems; the social, economic, cultural and historical contexts of political behaviour; and the factors accounting for political change. • Recognise the ways in which key concepts, theories and methods are used to analyse political ideas, institutions and behaviour. • Describe and illustrate different interpretations of political issues and events. |

| | <i>Typical</i> | <i>Threshold</i> |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| <i>Generic intellectual skills</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Describe, evaluate and apply different approaches involved in collecting, analysing and presenting political information, including how to: identify issues for political enquiry; assess their ethical implications; and gather, organize and deploy evidence, data and information from a variety of sources. ● Identify, investigate, analyse and advocate solutions to problems. ● Develop a reasoned argument, synthesize relevant information and exercise critical judgement. ● Reflect on their own learning and seek to make use of constructive feedback. ● Manage their own learning self-critically. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Describe and illustrate different approaches involved in collecting political information, including how to: identify issues for political enquiry; recognize their ethical implications; and gather, organize and deploy evidence from a limited range of sources. ● Identify and investigate problems. ● Develop a reasoned argument and synthesize information. ● Make use of constructive feedback. ● Manage their own learning with guidance and support. |
| <i>Personal transferable skills</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Communicate ideas effectively and fluently, both orally and in writing. ● Use communication and information technologies for the retrieval, analysis and presentation of information. ● Work independently, demonstrating initiative, self-organisation and time-management. ● Collaborate with others and contribute effectively to the achievement of common goals. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Communicate ideas, both orally and in writing. ● Use communication and information technologies for the retrieval and presentation of information. ● Undertake academic work with guidance and support. ● Collaborate with others to achieve common goals. |

Politics benchmark group membership

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| Professor J Annette | Middlesex University |
| Dr E Bomberg | University of Stirling |
| Dr P Byrne | Loughborough University |
| Dr P Carmichael | University of Ulster |
| Dr N Craske | University of Liverpool |
| Mr R Dogan | University of Plymouth |
| Dr K Dowding | London School of Economics & Political Science, University of London |
| Professor P Garrahan | University of Northumbria at Newcastle |
| Dr A Geddes | University of Liverpool |
| Dr I Gordon | Kingston University |
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| Professor E Meehan (Chair) | Queen's University of Belfast |
| Dr J McMillan | University of Northumbria at Newcastle |
| Dr L F A Taylor | University of Wales, Aberystwyth |
| Professor C Thomas | Southampton University |
| Dr U Vogel | University of Manchester |
| Ms P Welch | University of Wolverhampton |
| Dr P Wingrove | University of Greenwich |