

# **Politics in Business Higher Education (HE) Courses: Curriculum Design, Teaching, Learning and Assessment**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article explores politics as a context subject on business degree programmes. Interpretation of quality and regulatory body stipulations, alongside curriculum design theory, is used to derive guideline specifics on essential politics content to include, namely ideologies, executive/legislature structures and business lobbying processes. Specifics on the positioning and sequencing of the politics content are similarly derived. Reflection on challenge issues on teaching politics to business students is undertaken in context of learning theory to arrive at constructive approaches both for in-class delivery and for assessment, including student group work design of manifestos for business.

**Key words:** *Threshold Concepts; Learning Styles; Politics; Essential Questions; Business Environment*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The fact that politics has some place in the HE business curriculum is to an essential extent beyond dispute; the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB, 2013) states the political as one of the key context areas of organisations to be covered in accredited business and management courses. Further, the standard business external environment acronym PEST (Politics, Economics, Social, Technological) explicitly includes P for Politics and so the conceptual equipment of business has politics within its remit.

Beyond this, however, more detailed aspects remain open for discussion and direction. First of all, in terms of curriculum design, there are the issues of the extent and the particular elements of politics content to be included in the business curriculum, as well as the positioning of that content in courses. Second, there is identification and exploration of the specific challenge issues that emerge from delivering politics content to cohorts that have chosen business as their higher education course. Finally with content and challenge issues in mind, there is constructive engagement with ways forward and pursuit of good practice for teaching, learning and assessment of politics in business HE. This paper aims at engaging all these aspects, making use of modern curriculum design models, teaching and learning theory, global business education quality assurance guidance, as well as published practitioner reflection.

One should note that this piece focuses on politics as the external environment issue and not internal organisational politics, which more readily applies to OB (Organisation Behaviour) and ODM (Organisation Decision Making) modules in the business curriculum.

## **EXTENT AND SPECIFICS OF CONTENT INCLUSION**

An initial point which indicates that the extent of politics content in business may need to be substantial comes from full extension of the external environment acronym; LE PEST C, while the P is directly Politics, the E of Economics is highly political since the bulk of macro and micro-economic policy environment decisions are taken by government politicians (barring of course monetary policy in the UK, USA and elsewhere). Further, the L of Legal environment of business is largely shaped by legislation which itself is created in the main by politicians, albeit from different levels of governance.

With regard to specific content, a recognition that government changes can lead to directional alterations in policies shaping the economic and legal environment means that an appreciation of political ideology, at least in so far as it influences the main parties, is an important component. Ability to forecast what may happen to regulation, privatisation/nationalisation and fiscal policy following elections, and in response to events, depends strongly on a grasp of ideological preference and association. Coverage of these aspects also helps achieve the International Accreditation Council for Business Education excellence criterion that business curricula ensure that students understand and are prepared to deal effectively with critical issues in a changing business environment. (IACBE, 2017).

Turning to modern curriculum design theory, the Threshold Concepts paradigm has been applied to the political content of business studies, focussing on the concept of Power (Williams, 2014). Threshold concepts have been defined as those jewels in a curriculum which are both transformative to learning and integrative in terms of showing the sense-making connections between elements of content in a course, (Meyer & Land, 2003; Cousin, 2006). With power asserted to have threshold concept status in business, it is argued here that an analysis of where policymaking power emanates and how it is balanced (or otherwise) is a very important topic for business studies. In practical content terms, this would indicate that coverage of the branches of a political system and their interactions is needed, i.e. executive, legislature, judiciary.

Further indication of what politics content should be included in a business studies programme can be drawn from consideration of the UK QAA's (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, UK) business management benchmark statements. As well as stipulations for consideration on how the external environment impacts firms, there is also specific mention advocating coverage of how firms may influence the external environment (QAA, 2015). In view of this, the role of organizations in shaping business relevant policy decisions, i.e. lobbying, is evidently being recognised as an important politics element for the business studies curriculum. While particular, large, high-profile firms may be able to exert influence on policy makers on an individual basis, the bulk of firms may only be able to do this through membership of relevant groups or associations. It is for this reason that it is here recommended that the politics content on HE business curricula include coverage of business lobbying processes and the role/activities of business lobby groups such as the Confederation of British Industry, CBI, and the US Chamber of Commerce, USCC.

It would seem then that the coverage of ideological beliefs, lobbying processes and branches of constitutional systems would constitute the core minimum of the politics material to be included on a business degree course.

## **POSITIONING**

With a picture established as to the essential politics content for a business degree, there remains the question of positioning of that content within a course. In particular there are the issues of staging and of focus, i.e. how early in the course to place the politics and whether to address the content in a dedicated module or scheme, or to locate specific content at various places on a course.

Because politics like economics exists as an environmental aspect in business, there is scope for dispersing elements of content across a course and attaching them to core modules, e.g. marketing and human resource management, as and where they are most applicable. This was the approach adopted with regard to economics by Miller (2000) in what was termed an integrated business curriculum.

The problem with this approach for politics content is the fact that the same specific elements have applicability on many different modules. For example the topics of ideology and lobby groups have bearing for the finals level modules International Business Environment, Public Sector Management, Strategic Human Resource Management and Sustainability for Business on the University of Hull Business Management Degree at Grimsby University Centre. In view of this being the likelihood on most business courses, there is greater efficiency and avoidance of excess duplication of underpinnings, in dedicated coverage at an early stage in the business degree, enabling multiple diverse application later.

The notion of including the political content at an early stage in a business curriculum also accords with the typology work on threshold concepts by Davies & Mangan (2007), distinguishing between Basic, Discipline and Modelling forms of conceptual change with the concepts involved here conforming to the first category in that they enable understanding of everyday experience (e.g. what people face in the workplace and see on the news) to be transformed through integration with ideas from the discipline.

With substantial dedicated coverage of politics warranted at an early stage on business degree programmes, there is also the positioning issue of whether a stand-alone politics for business module is merited. It is advocated here that politics and economics be covered together in an introductory module. The inextricable link of political ideology to economic theory – especially macroeconomic – as noted by Carey (2013), means that module separation would lead to disjointed and limited exploration of both, including on business degree programmes. Conversely there is caution regarding positioning politics into an overarching business environment type of module. This approach can lead to an excessive diminution of politics focus – partly due to the topic breadth of business environment as a whole, as well as the likely emphasis in such a module on ensuring that all the business environment tools of analysis, e.g. SWOT, Stakeholder, Porter's Five Forces, are covered, with little in the way of explicit exploration of underpinning content from within the politics theme. It is suggested here that such early stage tools focus should be housed in an introductory strategy module on a business degree. At Grimsby University Centre, the two aspects of politics and economics are covered at level 4/freshman year in the single two-semester module: The Economic and Political Environment.

## **ISSUES AND CHALLENGES**

One of the most direct issues and sources of challenge for teaching politics in the business studies HE curriculum is the fact that the students in the cohort have by definition not chosen politics as their subject of study but business. This is a broad point which presents issues on demonstration of purpose which must be addressed. Furthermore, there are variations and subtleties within this aspect that if anything make the teaching and learning situation more challenging.

Business studies especially in HE can reasonably be depicted as on the midpoint or cusp of a number of dichotomies with respect to education; i.e. partly vocational and partly academic (Macfarlane, 1997), as well as being partly scientific and partly arts/humanities oriented (Mulligan, 1987). This

midpoint position of business studies translates into a good deal of variety across cohorts that select the subject. As such it is wise to expect a mixture within a group including students who vocationally want to get on with learning the active functions of business, marketing, accounting, human resource management, operations, alongside students who are more happy to engage in the conceptual and the contextual. If anything this is most prevalent as a challenge in non-traditional HE teaching, e.g. in community colleges where mature students, as well as students coming through from vocationally focussed business courses, are likely to be just as numerous as students with a sixth form/ twelfth grade background having studied a range of subjects including humanities and social sciences. This likely variation can also be seen in context of Kolb (1984)/ Honey & Mumford (2006) learning styles preferences with some students wanting to focus on concrete experience and active experimentation and others more disposed to abstract conceptualization and reflective observation. This fits with findings of learning style variation in business studies cohorts as shown in Loo (2002), and Biberman & Buchanan (1986). In practical terms though, it essentially means that the business tutor very likely faces a big variation both in terms of inclination and in terms of relevant prior exposure across a cohort for the study of politics.

## **APPROACHES**

### **Curriculum Presentation**

With disposition differences linking to appreciation of purpose being a challenge issue for politics teaching on business courses, it is key that this aspect is addressed at the very outset in terms of materials/content presented to the cohorts. Here the 'essential questions' curriculum design work of Cafferky (2012) has value. It is noted that this approach was initially put forward in the cited article as a means of addressing demonstration of purpose issues with regard to ethical and external environment topics for business students, and so the first glance fitness for purpose would seem to be evident. The approach relates to curriculum development around and within question issues designed to increase active student involvement in topics and counteract/address tendencies for students to wonder why they have to learn the material. Stemming from support of the Socratic method of in-class questions to increase learning, the essential questions approach goes further to assert that an entire course, module or scheme be couched in a few essential question issues – each one comprising perhaps of a number of topics. Pivotal here is that the question issues have a bearing for the programme that the students have chosen in an apparent first-glance way as well as ultimately a deeper one. By way of illustrative and debateable example, a module comprising the previously noted aspects of ideology, structures of political power and business lobbying, could be initially presented in a handbook schedule, or published scheme of work, under the following essential questions:

- The Government Policymakers I: Who shapes the business environment?
- The Government Policymakers II: What drives their decisions?
- The Government Policymakers III: How are the decisions reached?
- The Government Policymakers IV: Can business influence the situation?

One should note the two different sides to curriculum development and design at work here; sides which are compatible and not contradictory because they chiefly apply to different stage roles within curriculum design. In terms of intrinsic syllabus construction and positioning, methodologies linking to threshold concepts and quality body stipulations are rightly dominant; the essential questions approach comes to the fore in terms of organizing and presenting this content in the form of a meaningful curriculum in which each part has an immediate as well as ongoing sense of relevance to the student. One may also reflect that in partly vocational courses like business, there may be a difference between the usefulness of threshold concepts in curriculum and syllabus construction, and their usefulness in initial curriculum presentation, with approaches such as essential questions having a

key role in the latter. In view of the definitive revelatory nature of threshold concepts, as shown in their transformative and integrative characteristics/criteria, this is largely to be expected. Of course, ultimately, especially in higher education business, the student and tutor should ideally reach a comparable position as far as the threshold concepts involved and their rationale is concerned.

### **Teaching, Learning and Assessment**

Returning to the experience and inclination variations within business cohorts and the issues presented, the learning style differences in the context of Kolb (1984) and Honey & Mumford (2006) can be related to different preference points or phases on an experiential learning cycle. In view of this it is not surprising that some of the ways forward within such differentiated groups involve creating resources that allow for different starting points when engaging teaching learning and assessment.

A major example of this is the linking of ideology to policy steps of relevance to business. Students with experience of and disposition towards the contextual and the conceptual may be inclined initially to explore and debate ideologies and then ultimately do some linking to specific policy measures and business impacts. Students inclined to a practical or concrete experience focus, as well as mature students with an experience of the world of work, may have a greater initial ability and disposition towards discussing policy specifics that have had a bearing in the workplace. Examples in the UK and USA could include minimum wage legislation and redundancy notification rules. In this case the extension would be a mapping back from workplace effects and policy measures to party in charge in executive/legislature and ideology of that party, perhaps initially covered as belief.

While initial content delivery may have to be to some extent sequential, it is advised that in-class activity and discussion should allow and clarify the flexibility of directional approach. This can be very effective for formative group work, especially if students of different preferred starting points are located in the same small group. It can also work well, thereafter, in individual summative assessments especially in formats where there is scope for visual mapping, e.g. presentations and/or poster assessment.

Another possible specific aspect, accommodating differences in initial inclination, appreciation of purpose and learning style, would be student construction of a Manifesto for Business. This would exist as small group work, be it as a class activity or formative/summative assessment. Concrete business application would start with initial diagnostics, in terms of what is currently beneficial and detrimental to firms in the business environment. This could feed through to drawing up a set of recommended changes, with reasoned justifications. The policy package of changes could then be contextualized ideologically, allowing that in practice it may constitute a mixture of standpoints. The task could also include the drawing up of a strategic or tactical plan for how to get the policy package into place, with relevant knowledge of executive/legislature structures and business lobby group activity being applied here. The title and content of the piece of work would intrinsically address the purpose of politics for business. The format is also one that could allow presentation and in-class peer criticality and feedback, essentially constituting initial policy debate. One should further note that this activity would be particularly effective at the end of a module comprising of both economics and politics for business, considering for example that an introductory knowledge of fiscal policy may inform coverage of constraints at the stage of manifesto construction, and development of budget-related criticisms in peer feedback/debate.

### **The Teaching Team**

Noting the demonstration of purpose issues and the necessary facility for initial grounding of material in business experiential practicalities, it is advocated here that the political content take the form of dedicated delivery by business tutors to business cohorts. This means that the business school

should avoid infilling business students onto an introductory politics module initially conceived for politics majoring freshmen and delivered by a politics faculty tutor. Politics as a subject undoubtedly has interdisciplinary bearing and topics within it may possess the integrative threshold concept criterion, connecting relevance across numerous majors such as contemporary history and sociological studies. Nonetheless the need for course relevant contextualization necessitates business cohort dedicated delivery by a member of the business school. It has been noted, by Land, Meyer, Cousin & Davies (2005) that the integrative aspect of threshold concepts is subject to challenge when a specific subject field is taught within the curriculum of another course, as politics is with business.

## CONCLUSION

Politics is an important and pervasive contextual element in an effective business degree course which warrants dedicated attention early on in such a programme. Critical politics content for business includes ideologies, constitutional power structures, as well as lobbying processes in business context. There is value in setting the content alongside introductory economics in a module focussed on those two environmental components. Teaching and learning needs to be business cohort specific for the contextual element to be effectively engaged. The content presentation can and should be couched in essential question themes of immediate bearing for business. Within delivery of the content, activity and assessment design should allow for different entry points to suit both practical and conceptual preferences of students across a cohort. Ultimately, engagement of both conceptual and practical elements is vital to ensure appreciation of what politics and policy can and does do to shape the environment of business activity.

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