

Optionality and employability in political studies assessment

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss the potential for using assessment optionality - a practice of allowing students some degree of choice in their mode of assessment - as a key site for the development of employability skills for political studies students. Higher education, and political studies in particular, has struggled with the embedding of employability into a range of different curricula, with staff and students alike often resisting such changes. However, there is a need for students to graduate with a stronger awareness of the skills that they have developed during their studies. This article builds on research into assessment optionality in political studies to make a strong and novel argument - assessment optionality provides a fruitful opportunity to allow students to engage with employability in a way that does not interrupt the norms of their education, whilst also providing a host of other benefits.

Introduction

Assessment optionality - allowing students some degree of choice in their mode of assessment - is an innovation in higher education assessment practices that has seen a sharp increase in attention in recent years. Primarily, this attention is driven by concerns for increasing the level of inclusivity in assessment, though the literature also indicates a host of other potential benefits to the practice. One under-explored benefit of assessment optionality is the potential for developing graduates who have had the opportunity to reflect on and consciously develop employability skills while studying.

Given the non-vocational nature of the discipline, Politics and International Relations is one field that may be particularly well placed to reap the employability rewards offered by optionality. However, whilst such innovations can be beneficial, the process of changing long-established norms can be a difficult one. Politics and International Relations is a field where the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) literature has long noted that there is limited pedagogical innovation (e.g. Ishiyama, Breuning, and Lopez 2006). This resistance to innovation presents a challenge for those working on teaching and learning in the field -

stronger and specific arguments need to be developed to justify changes to well-established curricula and educational norms.

This article, drawing on the results of research into the broader benefits of assessment optionality in political studies education (see Moulton, 2025) provides, for the first time, subject-specific insight into the potential utility of assessment optionality, focusing on the employability-centred findings of that research. The discussion demonstrates that there is a strong case for considering optionality as an employability tool that could easily be placed within political studies curricula.

This article proceeds as follows. The first section provides a review of the literature on assessment optionality, exploring the benefits of the practice in higher education. This section briefly introduces the conclusions of subject-specific research carried out by the author into assessment optionality in political studies education - an introduction that will provide the foundation for why a further examination of assessment optionality and employability is warranted. The following section will explore current approaches to assessment optionality in political studies, especially focusing on the resistance points that exist to modifying political studies norms to embed employability. The final section presents the core argument of this paper: that there is a strong case for using assessment optionality as a way to allow political studies students to consciously engage with their skills development during their education and thereby improve their employability.

Assessment optionality

As part of the wider shift to flexible learning in higher education (Elkington, Chesterton and Wood, 2024: 103), assessment optionality is an idea whose time has come. The contemporary enthusiasm for providing students with a less rigid and more choice-centred approach to their education was driven in-part by the COVID-19 pandemic (Pawilen, 2021), though its utilisation has remained as the pandemics effects have lessened. Flexible approaches to student engagement with learning have been found to cater to the diverse needs of a diverse student body.

The concept of letting students have some degree of autonomy in the assessment process is one that comes under a number of different labels, including: flexible assessment (Pawilen, 2021), negotiated assessment (Fellows 2024), assessment empowerment (Francis, 2008) and student choice in assessment (Spinney and Kerr, 2023). This article uses the term of assessment optionality throughout, the term preferred in the landmark Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's report *Optionality in Assessment: A Cross Institutional Exploration of the Feasibility, Practicality & Utility of Student Choices in Assessment in UK Higher Education* (Firth *et al.* 2023). Optionality is an idea that challenges a long-established norm of education, as Spinney and Kerr state: 'Under the traditional teacher-centred approach, professors have traditionally exercised total control over what, how, and when students' learning is assessed (2023: 46). This "total control" by instructors then places students in the position as passive participants in the process of assessment (Deeley *et al.*, 2019: 386).

In 2024, I undertook staff-student partnership research with political studies students at the University of York to explore the potential utility of adopting assessment optionality in the course of political studies education. The research provided novel, subject-specific insight into assessment optionality's benefits and made recommendations for its implementation - for the full results of this study, see Moulton (2025). As part of the staff-student partnership research, a definition of assessment optionality was co-created:

Assessment optionality is a practice wherein students, based on their personal preferences and needs are provided with flexibility and control over the ways that they are assessed. With optionality, students independently choose from a menu of possible assessment formats that cater to a diverse body of skills and needs. These formats include traditional and innovative styles of assessment and, guided by module convenors, reflect the module learning outcomes (Moulton, 2025: 3).

This definition is one that discounts some of the possibilities of assessment optionality. For example, Firth *et al.* (2023: 7), point to the possibility of optionality including variance in assessments' word length, weighting, and submission date. Instead, this definition, co-created with political studies students, focuses squarely on choice of assessment format. It is this definition of optionality that is the basis of this article, due the subject-specific nature of its creation and, therefore, relevance. Assessment optionality is consequently understood as a

practice wherein students are presented with a range of possible assessment formats on a given module (e.g. essay, policy report, presentation) and then are given the choice between those different formats.

The contemporary SoTL literature on assessment optionality points to a number of potential benefits of the practice, including the improvement of student outcomes, student motivation and engagement, and the overall inclusivity of assessment practices (Craddock and Mathias, 2009; O'Neill 2017; Deeley et al. 2019, 394; Firth et al. 2023; Wanner, Palmer and Palmer 2024). As with any innovation, there is also the potential for negative impacts from introducing changes to assessment. For example, increased administrative workloads that result from introducing additional formats of assessment or the stress and anxiety that having to choose a mode of assessment might provoke in assessment (Bevitt, 2015). However, on this second point, Spinney and Kerr found that students in one study had much more to say about the benefits of optionality than the negatives (2023: 51). Additionally, there are consistent concerns around fairness, i.e. students being graded for different assessments but for the same course, related to the general practice of optionality (O'Neill, 2017).

However, the SoTL literature on this subject is at a nascent stage and there is still limited research into the practice and impacts of assessment optionality (Elkington, Chesterton and Wood, 2024). This heightens the need for serious engagement with the concept of optionality, but also with the arguments in favour of instituting the practice. With those arguments in place, wider adoption may follow - and with that wider practice would come increased opportunities for research into assessment optionality's educational impacts.

It was to explore the potential case for assessment optionality's adoption that I previously conducted research into giving political studies students a choice in how they are assessed. That staff-student partnership research produced four main themes within the case for optionality's adoption: 1) the opportunity to boost the authenticity of assessment to be more in line with political studies as a subject; 2) the opportunity for students to develop employability skills and an awareness of those skills; 3) the opportunity to provide students with agency, key to developing the leadership and decision-making attributes that are expected of political studies graduates and 4) the increased inclusivity of assessment - with inclusivity being something that political studies students are shown to care deeply about.

This article focuses on the second of these four themes - the potential employability benefits of employing assessment optionality in political studies education. The following section introduces the subject of employability in the field and why it is in need for such particular and in-depth analysis.

Political Studies and the employability agenda

Employability is not a subject that is always approached with enthusiasm in higher education. As Jones and Lishman (2023: 349) have stated: ‘Employability is one of these concepts that polarises opinion’. Academics are often, according to Daubney (2022), prone to reject the subject with a simple refrain: “teaching employability is not my job!”. In part, this opposition is due to nebulous understandings of employability - tied in with the confused picture of contemporary employment norms (see Williams *et al.* 2016 for a review of this relationship as well as the variety of definitions of employability). In this article, employability is defined as the range of qualities that one needs to demonstrate to gain employment upon graduating from their degree. Embedding employability practices within established curricula faces for resistance for a host of reasons, including the pressures that it adds to already extensive academic workloads, the efficacy of asking academics to take such a central role in questions of employability, and that the employability agenda distracts from well-established and designed academia curriculums (see Moulton 2024 and Daubney 2022 for a further review of points of resistance).

There might be particular features of political studies as a field that makes it a discipline particularly prone to resistance to employability. Those in political studies might, for example, be particularly aware of and resistant to outside political interference in the norms of higher education that are exerted in an effort to increase its focus on employability outcomes (e.g. Sin, Tavares, and Amaral, 2019: 921). For example, Pal’s (2022) Marxist ‘employability as exploitability’ critique of the employability agenda is one that is much more likely to be found in the field of political studies than it might, say, in the field of biology (though this is not to put down the activism of Marxist biologists, of course). However, giving the impression of being at a total remove from the employability agenda may also be one that does not elicit positive results for political studies education. In 2020, the University of Sunderland shuttered its political studies degree with the defence from the

university's management that it was adopting a careers- and professions-focused approach (David and Maurer, 2022: 312-313), with the questionable implication being that a degree in political studies offered no such thing. Complete rejection of any engagement with employability is also not something that will necessarily serve political studies students; contemporary students are graduating into extremely complex worlds of work.

The question of employability is one that has nagged at political studies for a long time. Even scholars working in the field have felt it necessary to ask: "What is the point of a political science degree" (Maineau 2020). Features of political studies curricula, as well as the motivations of students electing to study in this field, do not make the answer to this question immediately clear. For example, it is unlikely that even a significant minority of political studies students study the subject because they wish to become politicians (Harrison, 2012: 39). As Jones and Lishman propose: 'If you were to ask your students why they are studying politics, public administration or international relations, a wide range of answers are likely to ensue' (2023: 349). This is the result of what Harrison describes as a "fuzzy link" between a degree in political studies and a clear employment outcome: 'Students opt for our subject because they have an "interest" in the subject matter, and enjoy the opportunity to develop skills such as critical analysis and problem solving' (Harrison 2012: 39), not because they all share a common career goal. This situation can give the impression that political studies is a field that is on the back foot when it comes to instituting positive career outcomes.

In response to the employability agenda, some political studies instructors have designed employability-focused modules to be part of political studies degrees (Jones and Mishman 2023) or changed the assessment format so that the mode of assessment is one that is more connected to "real-world" professional applications' (Paci, 2025: 2). Others have suggested that academics should play the role as careers consultants to their political studies students (Chaturvedi and Guerro 2022). However, criticisms of these approaches, and the centralisation of the employability agenda, also exist - that they focus on the development of skills that might already be developed during the course of political studies education or that such innovations limit students' agency (see David and Maurer, 2022). They also constitute interventions that might seek to change more than is truly necessary in well-established curricula. Daubney (2022) finds that graduate employers find that it is not that students actually lack employability skills on finishing their studies. Instead, students lack a clear awareness of what skills they have developed during their studies. Therefore, allowing key

moments for consideration of skill development might be a vital, lost cost, intervention that would also effectively serve the employability agenda. The following section explores an alternative in engaging political studies students with the employability agenda - assessment optionality - suggesting that it can be a pathway to allowing for the development of employability skills awareness whilst also providing an approach that is more insulated to the criticisms that other methods have received.

Optionality and employability: Skillful symbiosis

In their multi-institution review of optionality in assessment, Firth *et al.* (2023: 19), only make brief mention of the potential employability benefit to employing optionality, stating: ‘Implementing options in assessment, such as practical projects, presentations, or real-world simulations, could better align education with the needs of the job market, potentially enhancing students’ employability and long-term career prospects’. Though this development of ‘real world’ experiences through assessment may provide useful employability outcomes, this is a framing that undersells the potential benefit of assessment optionality - that it provides students with a critical juncture in their education to consider their skills development. Assessment optionality provides students with the opportunity to make a choice in how they are assessed. This choice, in turn, has the capacity to shape positive employability outcomes for students. A key argument underpinning this approach is that assessment is not only a test of learning but is also a vital site of learning itself (Deeley *et al.* 2019: 386-387). It is a site of learning that, through the insertion of student choice and decision, can be developed to nurture students’ awareness of their own skill development and the impact that this might have on their life after completing their studies. This therefore provides an employability intervention that counters two of David and Maurer’s (2022) key criticisms of the employability agenda in the social sciences - that suitable skills are already developed during the normal course of education and that centralising employability reduces student agency.

David and Maurer’s (2022) critique of the centralisation of employability in political studies education (as well as the wider social sciences) asked a key question: ‘why focus on employment-related skills in a discipline that already positively required (even if not always perfectly) students to acquire those self-same skills (e.g. research skills, communicating

complex ideas orally and in writing, applying theory to current events)?'. However, this is a question that misses part of the issue with the contemporary employability agenda. As noted in the section above, it is not that graduates lack employable skills, it is that they lack a sufficient awareness of those skills. Therefore, there is not a need for a wholesale redesign of political studies curricula. Instead, providing moments of engaged decision making provides a context for students to consciously reflect on how they want to direct their skill development through their studies. Assessment optionality provides such a moment of impactful decision making. If students are asked, for example, to choose between being assessed through an essay or a policy report (representing the balance of traditional and innovative assessment formats that was a recommendation of the staff-student partnership work detailed in Moulton, 2025), then students are provided with the opportunity to consider whether they do want to depart from, say, the traditional norm of the political studies essay for something that might be of more relevance to their future career plans, e.g. a policy report. It is suggested that this is a benefit that would go beyond simply stating that students would be assessed through an essay on one module and a policy report on another - the moment of decision making (choosing between assessment formats) makes students seriously consider how their skills are best developed, what experiences they might want to develop through education, and a host of other personal and useful considerations.

Providing this moment of decision making is one that also empowers students in the process of their learning. David and Maurer (2022: 308) argue that the institution of the employability agenda into contemporary Higher Education has 'resulted in a severe loss of agency' for academics and students alike. Their ensuing prescription is that there is a needed 'return of the academic to the academy as expert and educator and the student as student, with ownership over their learning but not their teaching' (David and Maurer, 2022: 310). The choice that is provided to students in the practice of assessment optionality is one that champions student agency - though designed within the context of the academic as expert and educator, through their role designing a relevant and impactful set of assessment choices. Providing this opportunity is particularly relevant in light of the focus on the competency in decision-making skills that a political studies education is meant to impart on students in the field (Quality Assurance Agency, 2023: 6). Whether students use this agency in line with consciously engaging with the employability agenda would therefore be a decision that they would get to independently make, reducing the negative reception that other employability interventions have received from academics and students alike (Daubney 2022).

Assessment optionality therefore marks a small intervention in the norms of political studies education but one that could have substantial impacts on the employability outcomes of political studies students. Importantly, it is an intervention that is less likely to face the points of resistance that other employability innovations in the field have faced - providing a stronger basis for adoption and embrace by both academics and students.

Conclusion

With students entering increasingly complex and demanding worlds of work, and with ensuing political pressure for change, there is a clear case for academics to engage with the employability agenda. However, there are often very compelling reasons for academics to resist such engagement. Driven by already intense workloads, a desire to defend their subject, and a host of other factors, academics are often prone to reject embedding employability into their established practices; this is a behaviour that may be especially pronounced in political studies education. However, there remains a strong case for students being provided the opportunity to engage with their skills development in a way that provides them with a stronger, more employable, profile on graduating.

This article has proposed that assessment optionality provides a “light touch” approach to engaging with the employability agenda. Building on the conclusions of a previously conducted staff-student partnership project (Moulton, 2025), this article marks the first in-depth examination of the benefits of utilising assessment optionality as a pathway for students to consider their skill development in the moment of selecting an assessment format. Providing students with a juncture within which to decide if they feel more competent at, or more invested in, one assessment format over another, provides students with an opportunity to consider their future and the potential application of their learning outcomes, in a way that overcomes many of the challenges of other employability interventions. The practice of assessment optionality has therefore been shown to be a useful tool in building employability into political studies education, one that serves the needs and expectations of academics and students alike and provides for an impactful intervention that still centres the norms of our discipline.

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