

Looking ahead - International Relations Masters – 15 June 2021

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome back to Student Hub Live. In this session, we are looking ahead at the International Relations Masters. So I'm joined by William Brown, who is a senior lecturer in politics and international studies, and has taught at OU for many years. His research focuses on Africa's international relations. I'm also joined by Eddie Wastnidge, who's a senior lecturer in politics and international relations. And Eddie's research focuses on the politics and international relations of the Middle East. And he's co-chairing the new MA in International Relations, alongside Will. So very big, warm welcome to you today.

We have been talking about so many challenges. We've just been discussing some of the challenges to global development. And now we're going to focus on some of the challenges in terms of international relations. Eddie, I'm going to invite you to make a start by filling us in on some of the issues that you see as important. But Damon and everyone at home, I wonder if you might think also about some of the challenges that affect our community. We've been talking a lot about borders and boundaries locally, and further afield as well, trade, et cetera. So perhaps you can think at home of some of the challenges that you see affecting us internationally, in terms of our relationships with other countries. But Eddie, why is this all so important right now?

EDWARD WASTNIDGE: Well, I mean, I'd say it's always an important time to, sort of, study IR actually. I mean, I would say that of course. It's the discipline that I'm teaching and researching. But I do think that we're at a particularly interesting moment in time to be engaging with a lot of the core questions and the big issues that IR as a discipline seeks to answer and understand. So you know, we're going through big changes in the international system at the moment, or in global politics more broadly. And there are certain developments, challenges, issues, whatever you want to call them, that impact all of us. And that can be the pandemic. It could be climate change. It can be, you know, even changes in government, you know, of certain countries that impact international affairs, you know.

IR is, you know, really, I think, a subject that seeks to address, it analyse, understand, you know, what's happening out there. So I think as a former colleague of ours, Olaf Corry, once said, it's a high consequence field of study, you know. So I think if you look at some of the things that IR seeks to address, you'll see why that's the case, you know. What are those things? Well, you know, I'm sure will come onto that. And I'm sure our viewers have, you know, some thoughts about that, as well. But yeah, it's just a really good time to do it.

KAREN FOLEY: But wow, it is a good time to do it. But I can imagine some of the challenges of making a module in a really, really complex setting. I mean, we've just had changes in terms of the US presidency. We've had the pandemic, Brexit. There are all of these things that are having massive implications, in ways that we perhaps hadn't even imagined. Even things like COVID and vaccinations and the extent to which we manage, you know, our percentage of vaccinations globally, are all having huge impacts, as well. Damon, I wonder if people at home

have thought of anything in the current context that's sort of affecting how we might view our relationships in the UK with other nation states.

DAMON MILLER: Well, I think it's coming back to things that, that's moving on from the development session earlier. So about how people work together, how people trade together, how countries organise themselves around things like Brexit and around things like the COVID impact. Emma, her father used to work at the FCO, so she's travelled around to different countries. So she'll have some insight into how some of this works through her dad's work. So yeah, I think people tend to, tend to think that international relations is, is something higher and it doesn't really impact on themselves. But clearly, the people with this today are thinking about this and how it impacts on themselves and on the UK. So yeah, some interesting things.

KAREN FOLEY: And environment's been on our minds a lot today. I mean, Peter mentions the global governance of environmental policy and that having an effect. Eddie, is that something that you would see as an issue? And might you sort of offer some insight in terms of how, through that international relations lens, you might address something like that?

EDWARD WASTNIDGE: Yeah, I mean, environment's one of many challenges, I guess, that IR looks at. I mean, if you think about how states interact over certain issues that we say, let's take climate change as an example, you know. What, you know - we will look at a different dynamics that play from that. So one aspect might be around how states negotiate treaties to, you know, tackle climate change or something like that. That might be one kind of cooperative way of doing things. But then, you know, states have their own interests, as well. Their own, you know, national interests that they might want to protect. And that would be another angle that can be looked at, as well. And that affects the way that states interact within the international system. So there's lots of different ways, you know, you can, you can look at things through international relations, definitely.

KAREN FOLEY: Very, very complex. So the challenge then, Will, I guess, is in terms of how you cover something in a qualification. Can you tell us a bit about your thoughts, in terms of how you and Eddie have designed the qualification? What's been the rationale of some of the key topics? You've sort of taken quite a systematic approach in terms of some of the areas of focus that you've gone into detail on.

WILLIAM BROWN: Yeah - - a whole range of concepts at the same time. We've tried to root the teaching of the module, of the two modules that make up the MA, in real world problems, real world dilemmas. It's what we sometimes refer to as dilemma-led teaching, where we're putting an issue or a problem or some high-level problem at the international level at the front of the teaching, and then work from that to talk students through some of the conceptual analytical tools they need to understand that. And some of the theoretical debates that arise around those.

So the module [INAUDIBLE] MA focuses on [INAUDIBLE] what we challenge is, the sources of and the different varieties of division in the international system, the effect of rising powers on international order. We look at security from two different angles. You just mentioned environment. That's one of the angles we look at. To what extent is climate change and other

environmental problems a security threat of a global scope? But also look at security in more conventional terms and how that notion of what threats that states face has changed over time.

And then we also look at some other issues that are very much foreground and have been in the G7 summit that's just taken place. And that is how the democratic countries of the world should respond to or are responding to what they see as a challenge from authoritarian states. And we finish with a more global overarching question around whether there is a possibility of global ethics, shared ideas and norms that the world can [INAUDIBLE] the international community can seek to act on. So it was kind of those kind of real world dilemmas at the forefront.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. That's wonderful. Thank you very much. We're having a few little sound issues there, but I think most of us hopefully got the gist of it. And Damon, do let us know if there are any questions. In fact, how is everyone doing at home, Damon? Are we all with tea and happy?

DAMON MILLER: I think so, yeah, I mean, Peter's flagged up the status of democracy. So as Eddie [INAUDIBLE] as was just being discussed. But also the issue of human rights and how, how important that is when you're dealing with countries, particularly in places like at the G7, where you have big countries. Or if we're trying to get a trade deal with China, how do we approach human rights and the issue with that? So there's some really interesting questions coming through about that. And the issue, the global ethic, particularly with Hong Kong. So how does the UK deal with China over Hong Kong? And does the UK still have a right to intervene?

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, big questions. Well, my dogs aren't interested. Sorry. They're having a little fight under the table, so I'm going to have to just pick one of them up, just to reassure everyone at home, it's not some mad growling that it sounds. It's just this rather cute little thing here whose rather a bit of a terror. I'll see if I can get her removed. The joys of broadcasting and working at home. And they say never work with children or animals. So, Eddie, I wonder if you could tell us a bit about who, who this module is aimed at. I mean, I know so many students - and we've got lots of Level 1 students here today - are really interested in this notion that they can go on and develop their, you know, qualifications at postgraduate level. But who might be interested in this?

EDWARD WASTNIDGE: Sure, great question. I mean, obviously, I'm going to say everyone. But I think ultimately anyone who's, you know, interested in the kind of, those big issues. So Will outlined the big questions we're building the MA around. But anyone who's interested in those kind of major global challenges, some of the things we've touched upon initially, you know, should consider it. I mean, the beauty of this subject, I think, is that you can, you know, you can really drill down into areas that interest you.

So although we've got those kind of key big questions that we've built it round, because we felt it was important to situate it in kind of real world, so to speak, they're, they're just a way of organising the main teaching. And actually, you know, what we're giving is lots of space for independent study, the chance to engage with things that you might want to deepen your understanding of. So there's a lot of scope.

But I mean, you know, in terms of the obvious, you know, market or the type of student we want, I think anyone who's studied international relations or International studies previously will obviously, you know, be really interested in this. But we've also designed it in a way to make it accessible for students who perhaps have only done a little bit of relevant study, maybe in a [INAUDIBLE] discipline or maybe they've done history or another social science subject, as well. So I'd say it's for anyone who's got an undergraduate degree who's interested in international relations. And if you're someone who wants to find out the way, you know, the world works and why certain issues are contentious, you know what the underlying causes are for these big questions, then, then I think, you know, it's for you.

KAREN FOLEY: And many people will go on to do a postgraduate degree because, for example, they want to get into academia. So they could be like you, Eddie, and end up researching lots of interesting things. in a slightly different context. So there's that practical application, but also, you know, people can go into things for different reasons. And also some people just want to have a postgraduate qualification, because there are so many transferable skills that are useful in many other contexts.

So I wonder if we could sort of talk about some of the stuff that people might gain in terms of skills from the qualification. Will, do you want to fill us in on what people are going to actually be doing, and therefore what studying at postgraduate level, in particular with this module, would be able to give them in terms of skills?

I think we may be losing Will. I've certainly got rid of one of my dogs, anyway. So we're a bit quieter on this side. Let's see. Eddie, can you answer that question for us?

EDWARD WASTNIDGE: Of course. Of course, yeah. I mean, you know the - one of the other aspects of this, and not just, you know, people are coming from perhaps more the academic route is that people who are already well into their careers, you know - they might be working in something like the civil service or, you know, charities or anything, you know, that broadly international scope, you know, their employer might want them to have a little more training in some of these key areas. So, you know, we're, we're very keen on helping students who want to up-skill, as well.

So a big part of what we're doing is teaching these kind of independent research skills. So certainly in the second part of the degree, there's going to be a big focus on a postgraduate level dissertation. And there's a huge amount that goes into that prior to doing your own research project. You know, you have to build up a whole suite of, kind of, research method type skills, I suppose.

So, you know, we'll give students good grounding in, you know, basic stats. They'll be qualitative approaches, you know, giving students the whole suite of different methods that they can apply then to their own sort of independent research project. But like I say, I think that the real focus is on developing those kind of skills as an independent learner. And that's one of the things that's a little bit different with the postgraduate level, obviously. You've got a much more kind of leeway to go off and pursue your own, your own areas. Looks like Will's back now. I can see him -

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant.

EDWARD WASTNIDGE: - back on screen.

KAREN FOLEY: Will, are you back with us?

WILLIAM BROWN: I keep getting booted out. Hopefully. I keep getting booted out.

KAREN FOLEY: It's just because you want to join the economic session next. I know what it is, Will. I've managed to boot out one of my dogs, as well. I think it must be the sort of afternoon witching hour, where the heat's got to everything. So yeah, but we're fine. So Eddie's just been filling us in on some of the sorts of skills that people might want to look at. But the other thing, Will, I wonder if you might add to that is this sort of whole notion of being an independent researcher at postgraduate level. You're using your initiative. You're often looking at a line of inquiry that's quite specific. So, you're developing all of those skills, generally, as a researcher. And again, those are very exciting, especially if you wanted to move into academic research or indeed any other area of research.

WILLIAM BROWN: Yeah, that's certainly the case. And [INAUDIBLE] independently [INAUDIBLE] work is something that OU students have in spades anyway at any level. It kind of goes with the territory. And it's something OU students are really good at. But where at master's level, the idea is that they can develop those skills further. We have a great deal of time within the module structure that is for independent research by student lines of inquiry that they're interested in, that they can develop those skills of planning research projects for themselves.

The Masters will conclude with an independently researched dissertation. So a lot of the time in the [INAUDIBLE] students will be building those research method skills and that independent planning and use of time, as well. So it takes it to a [INAUDIBLE] And it's useful, not only if they want to go in a research career, whether in academia or elsewhere, but it's hugely important to have those sorts of skills of self-direction and management in work and in many areas of life, as well.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Thank you, Will. Eddie, just to end this session, I wonder if you could tell us what excites you most about this new qualification. It's not something we've had before, is it?

EDWARD WASTNIDGE: No, it's not. And we're, you know, we're really glad that we've got the opportunity to do this, to work on this together. I mean, you know, just to tag on to what Will was saying now, I think the potential to enable students to develop those independent research project skills that you can use to help your understanding of the world, all those aspects of IR that we've talked about this afternoon, you know, I think that that is really exciting. I mean, for me, just personally, you know, production is great. You know, you get to really understand the subject from a student perspective. And, you know, there's, there's nowhere else really that puts the same thought into the pedagogy, into the learning design that, that the OU does. So I think that's really great for us. You know.

A lot of my colleagues will be writing their courses up over the summer, but we're spending two years doing this. [LAUGHS] you know, so those opportunities, you know the fact that we're working together and producing something that's very hopefully cutting edge and exciting for students, which is, which is really exciting for me.

KAREN FOLEY: And as you say, there are lots and lots of important issues that you need to cover, so it's very challenging territory, but a very exciting one, I think, as you've sort of pointed out today. So that's wonderful. Will and Eddie, thank you so much for that discussion. We're going to have a quick video break now. We're going to look at the BA in Economics and also meet one of the team, [INAUDIBLE] who's going to talk about behavioural economics and technology. Our next session then is looking ahead in economics, with Susan and Kevin. So join me for that in just a few moments.

[MUSIC PLAYING]