



Course information 2026-27

IR2213 International Organisations

General information

MODULE LEVEL: 5

CREDIT: 30

NOTIONAL STUDY TIME: 300 hours

MODE: Locally Taught, Independent Learner Route and Online Taught

Summary

This course builds on the foundations laid by the prerequisite course IR1198 International Relations: Theories, Concepts and Debates. It offers a comprehensive introduction to the theory and practice of international institutions. The course discusses International Organisations ranging from the United Nations, the World Bank, the IMF, the World Trade Organization, NATO, and the International Criminal Court, to regional international organisations (the European Union, the African Union, and ASEAN), and international institutions in issue areas such as the environment (climate change) and Human Rights. The course analyses why states cooperate through international institutions, the role international institutions play in world politics, as well as contemporary challenges that they face.

Conditions

Please refer to the relevant programme structure in the EMFSS Programme Regulations to check:

- where this course can be placed on your degree structure; and
- details of prerequisites and corequisites for this course.

You should also refer to the Exclusions list in the EMFSS Programme Regulations to check if any exclusions apply for this course.

Aims and objectives

The course seeks to give students the ability to assess and explain the role of international organisations in international politics, and to use pertinent theories to analyse the varied impact that international institutions have on key issues of concern to international society.

Learning outcomes

At the end of this course and having completed the essential reading and activities students should be able to:

- Describe concisely and explain the evolution of key international organisations such as the UN, WTO, IMF and World Bank, and of international institutions in the areas such as the environment or Human Rights.
- Identify contemporary challenges to the international institutional order and explain processes of institutional adjustment.
- Apply the main theoretical approaches (such as rationalist institutionalism, realism and constructivism) to identify and contrast different explanations for why states create international organisations, why they choose particular institutional designs, why they agree on certain institutional policies, why they do (or do not) comply with institutional rules, and how they adjust to contemporary challenges. Write clearly, effectively, and subtly about these issues.
- Use empirical evidence and examples of past and current events to assess the relative merits of different theoretical approaches to international institutions.
- Demonstrate a thorough understanding of the core literature on international organisations.
- Engage with this literature critically by developing their own analysis, applications, and argumentation.
- Express these abilities in clear, effective, and subtle writing.

Global Employability Skills

Below are the three most relevant employability skills that students acquire by undertaking this course which can be conveyed to future prospective employers:

1. Communication.
2. Complex Problem Solving.
3. Adaptability & resilience.

Essential reading

For full details please refer to the reading list.

Rittberger, Volker, Bernard Zangl, Andreas Kruck, and Hylke Dijkstra (2019) International Organization. 3rd edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave).

Hurd, Ian (2021) International Organizations: Politics, Law, Practice. 4th edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Assessment

This course is assessed by a three-hour and fifteen-minute closed-book written examination.

Syllabus

The course introduces students to the main theoretical approaches to the study of international institutions (rationalist institutionalism, realism, constructivism) and how they provide alternative, and sometimes complementary, explanations of key questions with regard to international institutions. The key questions that the course focuses on are why states create (or join, or leave) international institutions; why they chose specific institutional designs (especially with regard to decision-rules and the delegation of tasks to institutional bodies); how we can explain the outcomes of negotiations in international institutions (and how these are influenced by institutional design and domestic politics); under what conditions international institutions have an impact (both on the behaviour of states and with regard to achieving the goals of the institution); and the nature of contemporary challenges to multilateral cooperation and how these lead to changes in institutional forms and practices. The course then discusses these questions with regard to a range of specific international organisations, including the United Nations, NATO, the IMF, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, the International Criminal Court, and regional organisations (the European Union, the African Union, and ASEAN), and international institutions in issue areas such as the environment (climate change), health (infectious diseases) and Human Rights.

Part 1 Explaining the evolution of the contemporary multilateral international institutional order:

1. Introduction: the study of international institutions.
2. Why states create international institutions: rationalist institutionalism.
3. Why states create international institutions: realism and constructivism.
4. Explaining the design of international institutions: decision-rules and delegation.
5. Explaining decision-making in international institutions: the effects of institutional design and domestic politics.
6. Explaining the impact of international institutions: goal achievement and member state compliance.

Part 2 Challenges to the multilateral institutional order.

7. Challenges to the multilateral international institutional order.
8. Institutional change and its limits.
9. Accommodating rising powers.
10. Institutional experimentation.

Part 3 International institutions in practice: evolution, challenges and adaptation

11. Peace and Security: The United Nations.
12. Defence: NATO.
13. Human Rights regimes.
14. Atrocities: ICC.
15. Trade: the WTO.
16. Environment: climate change.
17. Development: World Bank and AIIB.
18. Finance: IMF.
19. Health: the WHO and infectious diseases.
20. Regional integration: EU, AU, ASEAN.