The Oxford University Diplomatic Studies Programme (Foreign Service Programme): a brief history, 1969–2019

The Diplomatic Studies Programme/Foreign Service Programme, a one-year postgraduate programme designed primarily for serving diplomats, is one of Oxford's longstanding windows on the international scene.

Reflecting back as the Programme celebrates its 50th anniversary, perhaps the most striking features of its history are its continuity of vision and multinational membership. Throughout its life, the Programme has built diplomatic capacity. It imbues diplomatic skills, analytic and strategic thinking, communication and impact skills and a capacity for leadership among each one of its members, as well as equipping them with knowledge on which to base a successful diplomatic or other international career. Many of the Programme's members have gone on to be diplomatic or national leaders: its alumni include royalty, heads of government, ministers as well as a large number of ambassadors and senior international officials.

As regards membership, the Programme has always been truly multinational, welcoming an array of exceptional members from all over the world. Today, it welcomes members from States small and large, developed and developing, southern and northern alike. Even in the diverse community of postgraduate Oxford, the Programme attracts an exceptionally broad range of nationalities. It is not unusual for one of its members to be the only student of that nationality in their academic year right across the 6,000 strong Oxford graduate student body.

Diplomatic Services around the world count over 1,000 FSP graduates among their members. Diplomats from over one hundred and forty countries, more than two-thirds of the member states of the United Nations, have attended the Programme. The diversity of background and experience of its cohorts contribute tremendously to every member's experience and development during their year on the Programme.

The years to 1969: the genesis of the Foreign Service Programme

Oxford has a proud history of encouraging those who in the words of Cecil Rhodes "esteem the performance of public duties as their highest aim", including through running programmes for overseas civil servants that culminated, from 1945, in the Overseas Service Courses. As many Commonwealth states approached independence, their governments realized their need to develop diplomatic capacity. Accordingly, in the 1960s the contemporary Overseas Service Course was adapted to allow for a small Foreign Service component. The University provided Foreign Service training to 71 students from 23 countries between 1958 and 1968.

In 1969, the Overseas Service Course closed and the Foreign Service element was transformed into the Foreign Service Programme, based in Queen Elizabeth House. Ralph
Feltham was an ideal Director of Studies for the new programme, having experience both of diplomacy and diplomatic training, and of Oxford University as Bursar of Rhodes House, Secretary to the Committee of Commonwealth Studies and Sub-Warden of Queen Elizabeth House. FSP No. 1 opened in October 1969.

1969 to 2010: the evolution of the Programme

During the early years, around 85% of the annual intake hailed from newly independent countries and received scholarships from the UK’s Overseas Development Administration. In 1981, when the ODA decided to reduce its scholarships, the FSP persuaded the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to offer financial support and extended its reach to governments able to finance their own students. As a result, the FSP broadened the geographic origins of its members, initially mostly in the Middle East and Latin America, and gradually attracting worldwide participation as has continued ever since. During the 1990s, the FSP welcomed many diplomats from countries formerly part of the USSR.

The FSP’s curriculum has always comprised subjects essential for diplomacy: International Politics, Public International Law, International Trade and Finance, and of course Diplomatic Practice. In the early years, Diplomatic Practice was not formally examined; this examination was added in 1990/91. Variants such as "Diplomatic Practice and Protocol", and for a number of years "Political Reporting", featured in earlier programmes. Sometimes "Practical Courses in Diplomatic Method" took place in the vacations, and occasional simulation exercises were held. Since 1990, the whole range of diplomatic practice has been included, including political, economic, commercial, public diplomacy and protocol aspects, and latterly digital diplomacy. For many years there have been simulations of multilateral negotiation and crisis management, as well as recorded media interviews.

The original qualification offered to those who completed the taught courses and examinations was the Postgraduate Certificate in Diplomatic Studies. In 2002/03, a Postgraduate Diploma in Diplomatic Studies was added in order to recognise those members who chose to undertake research for a dissertation in addition to the taught courses.

In 1989, the University approved a proposal to admit one or two Mid-Career Fellows to pursue their own research projects under academic supervision. The first Mid-Career Fellows arrived in 1990/91, one from Czechoslovakia and one from the United Kingdom. Two more, from the Republic of Korea and Lithuania, followed in 1992/93. The DSP has since received a succession of Visiting Fellows, several of them from Poland, and continues to be open to admitting a small number of mid-career Fellows each year.

In 2006/07, the Foreign Service Programme introduced a Master of Science in Global Governance and Diplomacy, to run in parallel to the existing programme. In 2007/08 the MSc became one of the mainstream courses offered by Queen Elizabeth House, Diplomatic Practice being one of the two choices of foundation course for the MSc. This relationship
continued until 2010, when the FSP moved to the Department for Continuing Education in Rewley House.

The founding Director retired in 1986, to be succeeded by Anthony Kirk-Greene and then by a former British diplomat, Philip McKearney. In 1988, Mr. McKearney resigned after a year in office. Anthony Kirk-Greene again took over on an interim basis. His tenure lasted until the appointment of Sir John Johnson, the first of a further series of former British diplomats, in 1990. In 1995 Sir Robin Fearn and in 1999 Christopher Long in turn took on the Director’s post. In 2003, the post was divided into two: a Diplomatic Director, Alan Hunt, a retired British diplomat, and an Academic Director, Dr. Rodney Bruce Hall, an American scholar in International Relations. Following the introduction in 2006 of the Master of Science in Global Governance and Diplomacy, the position of Academic Director lapsed. Dr. Hall continued as Director of the MSc, while Mr. Hunt became Director of the Foreign Service Programme.

2010 to date: the Diplomatic Studies Programme today

In 2010, with retired British diplomat Jeremy Cresswell succeeding Alan Hunt as Director, the Foreign Service Programme moved from Queen Elizabeth House to Oxford University’s Department for Continuing Education at Rewley House. The Department’s focus on the continuing education of professionals, including internationally, has enabled the FSP/DSP to flourish and to remain at the pinnacle of diplomatic training programmes despite a recent proliferation of diplomacy degrees in the UK and elsewhere. The Programme continues to be distinguished by its unique curriculum, combining Oxford academia with thorough practical vocational training for serving professionals. Every one of its members is a full member of an Oxford College, and so is part of a wider academic and social Oxford community.

In 2010/11, a part-time Master of Studies in Diplomatic Studies was added: selected Postgraduate Diploma students could spend a second year, at-distance and on a part-time basis, preparing a 15,000 word dissertation under remote academic supervision from Oxford. The first cohort of successful part-time MSt students graduated in 2012. The part-time MSt paved the way for the subsequent introduction of a full-time MSt, and so is now being phased out.

After Jeremy Cresswell sadly passed away in 2015, Kate Jones, formerly a lawyer with the British Diplomatic Service, succeeded him as Director. In 2017 the Foreign Service Programme changed its name to Diplomatic Studies Programme, in keeping with the more common name of diplomatic services today. In 2018 it introduced a one-year full-time Master’s degree. Members are now admitted either to the full-time Postgraduate Diploma, a nine-month full-time programme comprising the taught and examined courses of Diplomatic Practice, International Politics, International Trade and Finance and Public International Law; or to the full-time Master of Studies, a twelve-month full-time
programme comprising the four taught courses plus research and completion of a 15,000
word dissertation. By offering both the Diploma and the Master’s courses, the DSP is able
to cater both to those seeking primarily professional knowledge and skills, and those keen to
include a strong research focus in their year in Oxford.

While its precise destinations have varied over the years, the Programme continues to include
study tours. It currently includes a European Study Tour in the Easter vacation – often a
highlight of the year - to Brussels, The Hague and Geneva, taking in international
organisations and institutions such as the EU, NATO, the international courts, the
Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, UN, ICRC, and WTO; four days of visits
to political, government, commercial, civil society and media organisations in London; and a
three-day visit to Northern Ireland, a deep dive into post-conflict politics and reconciliation.
While academically independent, the Programme continues to maintain its links with the
Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and since 2015/6 has worked with the FCO’s Diplomatic
Academy to run an annual joint training day for FCO fast-streamers and DSP members.

In 2019, the DSP is adding an accredited part-time short course in Global Health Diplomacy
to its portfolio, recognising the urgent need for more professional learning and training in this
field.

Alumni

In addition to the consistency of its vision and the diversity of its membership, the
Programme is characterised by the warmth of its alumni community. It now has over 1,200
alumni, hailing from over 140 countries. This valuable network extends throughout
multilateral and bilateral diplomacy all over the world.