
Volume 6
Number 5 *Volume 6, No. 3, Fall 2013*
Supplement: Ninth Annual IAFIE
Conference: Expanding the Frontiers of
Intelligence Education

Article 15

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Anthony Glees

Centre for Security and Intelligence Studies at the University of Buckingham (BUCSIS)

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Recommended Citation

Glees, Anthony. "The Future of Intelligence Studies." *Journal of Strategic Security* 6, no. 3 Suppl. (2013): 124-127.

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The Future of Intelligence Studies

The Future of Intelligence Studies

Anthony Glees

Director of the Centre for Security and Intelligence Studies at the University of Buckingham (BUCSIS)

This paper seeks to stimulate debate on the following themes:

Pedagogical Approaches to the Teaching of Intelligence Studies
The Nexus between Intelligence Education and Intelligence Training
The Role of Intelligence Education in Developing the Profession

Broadly, it's my feeling that Intelligence Studies, and within them two critical questions, namely how and what is taught, and to whom, have reached a critical juncture in the UK, at any rate. The importance of the field and the strong level of home and international student interest in it have never been easier to establish.

As far as 'how and what' are concerned, in the past few years the UK has seen the publication of two authorized histories of secret agencies by Christopher Andrew and Keith Jeffery (MI5 and MI6), and the media have ensured that most thinking people now understand that a large amount of our national political activity today has a significant intelligence dimension. This comes perhaps because so much policy is intelligence-led or perhaps because public concern about, and interest in, the work of our intelligence agencies is far greater than at any time for the past twenty five years. But it is worth reflecting that the issue of 'what' also raises the question whether the primary focus of any higher education programme should be on a single national model, or several models. At the University of Buckingham we focus chiefly on the British intelligence model because we think, no doubt arrogantly, that it is not only best but also because it is of appeal to international students especially those from countries where, in the past, Britain had a colonial presence.

As far as 'to whom' intelligence education is provided, it is plain that this, too, has become an issue more openly debated. In the second half of 2012, for example, the British media gave prominence to a new 'apprenticeship scheme' as a trawl for recruits to our secret agencies (the Government's Communications Centre, GCHQ, was both the prime mover and intended chief beneficiary).¹ It raised the issue (well known to those who study 'Q') as to whether the best intelligence officers are graduates (the 'best and the brightest') or, in an era where cyber security is increasingly a problem, whether it would be smarter to go for eighteen year old 'geeks' who play computer games and know a thing or two about hacking. They'd be cheaper than graduates to boot. But MI6 also raised eyebrows with a very cleverly worded advertisement in Britain's main newspapers for two weeks running (timed to coincide with the release of the latest James Bond movie) indicating that they were after all sorts of different recruits.² Finally, slightly out of the public eye, Lockheed-Martin launched its 'Dungarvan' project with the Mercyhurst College's intelligence studies department (Mercyhurst is a Catholic university in the USA) in a bid to provide no frills intelligence 'training', clearly aimed at police intelligence operatives throughout the European Union whom the organisers feel do not need 'education' but simply 'instruction', most provided, it

¹ <http://www.channel4.com/news/scheme-to-lure-x-box-generation-into-code-breaking-careers>

² <https://www.sis.gov.uk/careers/roles/intelligence-officers.html>

would appear, by former middle-ranking FBI practitioners.³ It's easier to study the subject than it has ever been and students can choose whether they want to learn from those who have researched the subject but never been near a secret agency, or those who have worked for an agency but never done any serious research, or, indeed, from a mixture of both.

Several questions are hereby begged, critical to Britain's intelligence community as it prepares to meet the challenges of the third decade of the 21st Century. What does intelligence education need to consist of? To whom – and by whom – should it be provided? If 'training' rather than 'education' is the thing of the future, will that not make the most important and mind-developing aspects of intelligence studies redundant? Will not research suffer with a knock-on impact on advanced teaching? Should intelligence professionals be 'trained' to deploy specific 'skills' or should they be selected from the best and brightest, 'educated' and required to use their talents along with acquired skills to serve their nations and their liberties best in the future?

This broad set of questions mirrors an inherent (but I think highly productive) tension in the higher education field: whether the purpose of studying it is to educate intelligence students through research-led teaching to understand the subject and profit from it in a general way, or whether it is the purpose of higher education is to train the intelligence professionals of the future. I realise there is a difference here too between the UK and the USA where training is, understandably, a more significant deliverable than it is in a country like the UK (where the agencies recruit those they regard as best suited to the work and do their own training). Except that it is not as simple as that: apart from the recent interest in non-graduate eighteen year old apprentices, there is strong if for obvious reasons anecdotal evidence to suggest that postgraduate degrees in intelligence studies can be a pathway into the profession of intelligence officer.

My own insights, such as they are, are based on a decade's stated experience in teaching the subject, first at Brunel University and since 2008 at the University of Buckingham. Our baseline position at Buckingham is plain enough: we take good students who are interested in the subject, students who want careers in the field and those already in the field who believe they will benefit professionally from being skilled up as they would see it, in academe. By the same token we believe that intelligence work in the UK should be fully professionalised and that this would lead to better delivery and greater public confidence. We are trying to do what we can to progress this and finding some support for the idea. We have a strong outreach programme, having instructed those involved with intelligence-led activity in the police, the agencies and in government.

Thinking about this matter raises a related one: the role within it of practitioners. It is a fact that practitioner input (which I welcome and strongly support) has not merely been absolutely vital but also, paradoxically, that it has not always been healthy. Sometimes former practitioners can claim ownership of an aspect of the subject and can perhaps inadvertently stifle discussion on the grounds that they know the truth and that is that. This was, perhaps, more of a problem in British intelligence studies forty years ago than it is today when such people could make or break those writing about it. I always reflect on the fact that two of my closest colleagues here at Buckingham have been practitioners but have repeatedly said that they only really understood what it was they had been part of once they had left their services and were able to look critically at them from the outside.

³ <http://www.mercyhurst.edu/dungarvancenter/>

In short, a way forward must now be found to make a coherent case for the development of intelligence studies that is about 'education' and not simply 'training', firmly rooted in the traditional tasks of higher education (rather than secondary or further education). Whilst the imposition of a new subject orthodoxy on others should be resisted, we need to encourage new minds to work in this field in new ways, and to discourage colleagues from sticking too strongly to their existing areas of study, prompting them instead (via the offer of publication) to tackle new themes and problems. Diversity and innovation cause a subject to blossom; orthodoxy and arrogance cause it to wither.

The principal debates in intelligence studies are currently concerned largely with the following issues: the political accountability and the political oversight of secret intelligence agencies, their accountability and their competence in terms of tradecraft, political skills and ethical values (accountability and competence feed into each other). In my view, recent examples in the UK show that in the UK there are currently very major problems in respect of making covert action accountable.

As far as intelligence history is concerned, this remains a vital area but I am not sure that the principal debates here are making much headway in terms of their impact on scholarly (and non-scholarly) thinking about the real history of covert intelligence-led activity and its real impact on the history of politics.

I was not keen on the way in which the 'authorized' histories of MI5 and MI6 were produced (I believe that the secret agencies should not use patronage but either have established a committee of historians to examine whatever materials could be supplied to them) or that the documentary evidence should be placed in the public domain, allowing as many historians as possible to sift the evidence and present their findings in the normal way, free of any suggestion that the version they produce was 'authorized' by any government agency.

That said, Christopher Andrew (the beneficiary of three major projects put his way by the powers that be – telling the stories of Gordievsky, Mitrokhin and then of MI5 itself) has always been scrupulous in putting documents he's seen into the public domain wherever possible and speedily too (e.g. over Klaus Fuchs).

But there are interesting and important debates which never take place because of the lacunae, deliberate or accidental, in writing the histories of our secret agencies (e.g. the complete lack of any authorized account of the penetration of UK intelligence by Communist agents in the Second World War period or the relationship between the UK's secret agencies and the media). There has also been at least one serious allegation by a scholar of bias in the authorized history of MI5 (reported in *Intelligence and National Security*).

Perhaps the most over-researched area of intelligence studies has to do with the intelligence cycle and how it might be modified. I'd point to the latest issue of *INS* (April 2012) as a case in point (and I emphasise that you are doing me the great courtesy of asking my opinion, I'm not pressing it on you unasked!). Almost all of the articles which seek to schematize the business of objective analysis (yet always somewhere display a bias along the way) are, I find, dull and backward-looking. I also have pedagogical problems with this approach because in my own view if we are to get the best intelligence professionals possible, we need to encourage them to think creatively as well as systematically and that means avoiding at all costs 'box ticking' forms of analysis.

Part of the problem here, it seems to me, has been the lack of evidence with which scholars can get to grips. This may have led to over-theorization (there is a parallel here with Political Science and the study of International Relations more generally which has taken the subject away from the meaningful analysis of real political problems, and away from doing social good, into a narcissistic fascination with theories that have little if anything to do with real life politics).

I would say we need in the UK to ask more difficult questions about why we are not provided with more data from which to work (our Cabinet Office has shown over the past two years that it understands the question well enough, but it's equally plain it is not in a position to move forward). As far as our secret institutions are concerned, I believe we need to know far more about them and that there is no national disadvantage in our being allowed to do so. I believe, too, we ought to know far more about the activities of our secret agencies in third world countries, especially, perhaps Africa.

The question as to whether the relationships are good between those who study intelligence and those who make policy which is intelligence-led (where we are speaking about policy-makers in non-secret institutions) is a key one. In the UK these can be strong but always in a peculiarly British and non-institutionalised way. Ever since I started out as a doctoral student at Oxford University forty years ago I've had no great difficulty in speaking and engaging with those who have been involved or are involved in policy which is intelligence-led, or has a strong intelligence component. This is true whether the subject is historical (e.g. Communist subversion in the 1930s, 40s and 1950s) or political (e.g. counter-terrorism policy and counter-radicalisation policy).

Is there, in the UK, a good relationship between those who study intelligence and those actually doing intelligence work, I'd say 'yes', more than one might think as long as questions related to current operations are avoided as indeed they should be. Certainly we at Buckingham do have outreach to various institutions as and when this is appropriate (which is decided by them, not us). I know that we are not unique. Where this exists, then it is an important resource both to help scholars frame and refine their investigations and, hopefully, to impact on practitioners where appropriate.

The greatest challenge for intelligence studies is to surmount intellectual isolation by working together more systematically and less hierarchically – more workshops, more study groups, fewer large showcasing conferences.