

LA3G6-15 Public Inquiries: Democracy, Truth and Justice Beyond the Courtroom

26/27

Department

School of Law

Level

Undergraduate Level 3

Module leader

Achas Burin

Credit value

15

Module duration

10 weeks

Assessment

85% coursework, 15% exam

Study location

University of Warwick main campus, Coventry

Description

Introductory description

Many national constitutions provide for a power to hold investigations into matters of concern. Many countries in fact hold such investigations, whether or not their constitutions expressly provide for this, as do supranational entities (such as the European Parliament) and international bodies (such as the United Nations). This module considers the role of public inquiries in a society, predominantly that of the United Kingdom, contextualised by comparative practice in other countries.

Lectures will outline the long history of public inquiries in the United Kingdom, dating since Domesday Book, and their spread through the former British Empire. Perhaps the most famous public inquiry ever took place in South Africa, in the form of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. In workshops, we will discuss reasons why inquiries have come to prominence and what international practice can teach us about public inquiries.

In December 2025, The Times reported that there were more inquiries in the UK than ever before

“costing the taxpayer at least £554,000 per day”. Whilst inquiries’ costs are often cited by the media, it is less well understood that holding public inquiries correlates positively with indicia for democracy, both quantitative and qualitative. Are inquiries expensive wastes of time, or essential to a functioning democracy? How can they be designed to maximise their value? How are they similar to, or different from, traditional political accountability mechanisms and court-based adjudication? All these important questions will form the basis of ongoing discussion through workshops and lectures, and over the course of a term, we will consider what functions public inquiries play in our society.

Module aims

By the end of this module, students will have gained a familiarity with, and formed considered views on, some of the central debates surrounding the use of public inquiries as political and legal accountability mechanisms. The module will provide students with a broad grounding in ways of doing justice beyond court-based adjudication. Students will have deepened their understanding of the design of public inquiries and the connection between the functions public inquiries play in a polity and their design. Students will learn about the history of public inquiries within the United Kingdom, together with their spread across the British Empire and aspects of the current comparative global context. This module links with related modules offered within the Law School and disciplines beyond the Law School of politics, philosophy, social sciences and others.

Outline syllabus

This is an indicative module outline only to give an indication of the sort of topics that may be covered. Actual sessions held may differ.

This module considers the role of public inquiries in a society, across two lectures and seven workshops. The workshops will consider the core functions that inquiries play in society, while the first week and last week of term feature lectures. The first week of term comprises an introductory lecture on the history of public inquiries, setting the UK in an international context. The final week of term consists in a conclusory lecture on how we should evaluate public inquiries.

The following topics are indicative of what will be covered in the workshops relating to the functions served by public inquiries: (1) facilitating public participation in matters of national or international concern, (2) learning lessons for the future / informing government policy, (3) establishing truth and sense-making, (4) accountability and retribution, (4) righting historic injustices / compensation, (5) catharsis and forms of justice that are alternatives to court-based adjudication (e.g. transitional or transformative justice), (5) fulfilling the State's investigative duties under Arts 2, 3, 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights, (6) providing opportunities for direct democracy and knowledge democracy in an era of declining representative democracy, (7) restoring or increasing public trust.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the module, students should be able to:

- Articulate different functions pursued by public inquiries

- Explain relationships between inquiry design and the function(s) pursued
- Evaluate outcomes of public inquiries
- Compare inquiries to court proceedings and critically appraise justice and political accountability models beyond court-based adjudication.
- Show understanding of how the matters which inquiries investigate are shaped by systems and also how organisational responses to inquiries are affected by systems.
- Orally explain and justify their approach to a written coursework

Indicative reading list

[Reading lists can be found in Talis](#)

Research element

Students will be encouraged to undertake further reading on topics of interest, in particular when completing the summative assignment. It will not be mandatory to conduct further research, but students are more likely to score highly if this is done.

Interdisciplinary

As the title of the module indicates, the discussion focuses on public inquiries in society and is of interest to students of law, politics, philosophy, social sciences and beyond. This is reflected in the reading list, which features works from different fields including socio-legal frameworks, legal history, legal philosophy, comparative law and organisational studies. The focus of the teaching will satisfy those of both a theoretical and practical bent. The intention is for the module to be co-taught between the Warwick Schools of Law and Medicine, though this cannot be guaranteed and is subject to staff availability.

International

The taught content and reading matter incorporates a comparative law element. Public inquiries are an international subject in so far as the object of study is a feature in many different jurisdictions. Students are therefore able to use examples from any legal system in their arguments.

Subject specific skills

Students will equip themselves with skills of critical thinking and information literacy in respect of public inquiries specifically when they demonstrate the following module objectives:

- Articulating different functions pursued by public inquiries;
- Comparing inquiries to court proceedings and critically appraise justice models beyond court-based adjudication, appraise political accountability models.

In addition, students will build creative problem-solving skills when engaging with the following learning objectives:

- Explaining the relationship between inquiry design and the function(s) pursued by the inquiry;
- Evaluating the outcomes of public inquiries;
- Showing understanding of how the matters which inquiries investigate are shaped by systems and also how organisational responses to inquiries are affected by systems.

Although these are module-specific objectives, the module is interdisciplinary and will therefore benefit students in building these skills regardless of subject.

Transferable skills

Whilst the above-mentioned skills of creative problem-solving, critical thinking and information literacy are in principle transferrable, students will solidify transferrable skills of communication in addition. Specifically, students will build their confidence in oral presentation skills and written analytical skills. The assessment includes both an oral and written component.

They will also gain intercultural awareness through study of comparative jurisdictions, the discussion of the contribution of the Global South to international inquiry practice, and the focus on impact of Empire.

Study

Teaching split

Provider	Weighting
School of Law	90%
Warwick Medical School	10%

Study time

Type	Required
Lectures	2 sessions of 2 hours (3%)
Seminars	7 sessions of 2 hours (9%)
Private study	92 hours (61%)
Assessment	40 hours (27%)
Total	150 hours

Private study description

Private study and independent learning will consist largely of reading the material on the reading list, reflecting on its contents, and preparing for the weekly workshops by working through the questions for discussion. It would also include preparing for the assessment. Students are

encouraged to take up opportunities for a flipped/inverted classroom.

Costs

No further costs have been identified for this module.

Assessment

You do not need to pass all assessment components to pass the module.

Assessment group D

	Weighting	Study time	Eligible for self-certification
Assessment component			
Individual written coursework Essay on a tutor-devised question	85%	30 hours	Yes (extension)
Reassessment component is the same			
Assessment component			
Discussion of essay plan	15%	10 hours	No
Students will be required to submit an essay plan of up to 500 words for a one-on-one discussion with the module leader. Approximately 15 minutes is allowed per discussion. The mark element will be based on the quality of the plan (70%), ability to engage in the conversation and respond to questions (20%), and attending punctually at the agreed time (10%).			
Reassessment component is the same			

Feedback on assessment

Individual feedback will be given via Tabula and general cohort-level feedback via Moodle.

[Past exam papers for LA3G6](#)

Availability

Courses

This module is Optional for:

- ULAA-M130 Undergraduate Law
 - Year 2 of M130 Law
 - Year 2 of M130 Law
 - Year 3 of M130 Law
 - Year 3 of M130 Law
- ULAA-M131 Undergraduate Law (4 Year)
 - Year 2 of M131 Law (4 year)
 - Year 3 of M131 Law (4 year)
 - Year 4 of M131 Law (4 year)
- ULAA-M132 Undergraduate Law (Year Abroad)
 - Year 2 of M132 Law (Year Abroad)
 - Year 4 of M132 Law (Year Abroad)
- ULAA-M135 Undergraduate Law and Sociology
 - Year 2 of M135 Law and Sociology
 - Year 3 of M135 Law and Sociology
 - Year 4 of M135 Law and Sociology
- ULAA-M133 Undergraduate Law with French Law
 - Year 2 of M133 Law with French Law
 - Year 4 of M133 Law with French Law
- ULAA-M134 Undergraduate Law with German Law
 - Year 2 of M134 Law with German Law
 - Year 4 of M134 Law with German Law
- ULAA-M136 Undergraduate Law with Humanities (3 Year)
 - Year 2 of M136 Law with Humanities (3 year)
 - Year 3 of M136 Law with Humanities (3 year)
- UPHA-V7MW Undergraduate Politics, Philosophy and Law
 - Year 2 of V7MW Politics, Philosophy and Law
 - Year 2 of V7MW Politics, Philosophy and Law
 - Year 3 of V7MW Politics, Philosophy and Law
 - Year 3 of V7MW Politics, Philosophy and Law
- UPHA-V7MX Undergraduate Politics, Philosophy and Law (with Intercalated Year)
 - Year 2 of V7MX Politics, Philosophy and Law (with Intercalated Year)
 - Year 4 of V7MX Politics, Philosophy and Law (with Intercalated Year)