



## INTERNATIONAL STUDIES AS A FIELD OF STUDY

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### Cite this article:

Usiemure Oghenerioborue  
Christopher, Etor Charity  
(2025), International Studies  
as a Field of Study. African  
Journal of Social Sciences and  
Humanities Research 8(1),  
173-182. DOI:  
10.52589/AJSSHR-  
XNIUHNGV

### Manuscript History

Received: 11 Feb 2024

Accepted: 1 May 2024

Published: 6 Mar 2025

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**ABSTRACT:** *Increasing glocalisation of our world and interconnection of people of different climes have thrown up more issues in the global scene than ever before. These issues include those of refugees, xenophobia, climate change, and cross-border terrorism, migration of labour, light weapon proliferation and rapid spread of diseases from one part of the world to another. These emerging global issues have no doubt reinforced scholarship in International Studies (IS) which looks at societal problems from global perspective and also analyses the way in which relations among nations influence these issues together with impact of international organisations. The academic discipline dedicated to this was diplomatic history which in a way metamorphosed to International Relations. International Studies (IS), in recent times has become increasingly popular with various institutions offering it either as a stand-alone course or as one of two or more in a department. The field of study has grown significantly over the past century, developing into an interdisciplinary discipline that addresses complex global issues. However, it faces various challenges which include lack of consensus on its theoretical foundations; and fragmentation with scholars and practitioners grappling to define its core identity, scope and methodologies. This study attempts to examine the historical development, theoretical underpinnings, and future trajectories of IS to establish its relevance and adaptability in addressing the pressing needs of the 21st century. The paper is significant to the ongoing dialogue about IS as a cohesive and impactful field of study.*

**KEYWORDS:** international, studies, relations, importance, global issues, difference, definition, scope, evolution, history



## INTRODUCTION

Our world is interlinked today more than ever. Not only that actors other than nation-states have become increasingly involved in international affairs, the modern mode and manner of relations have also thrown up new challenges for nations. Several institutions especially in Nigeria have embraced International Studies as one of their academic disciplines aimed at studying global events and phenomena. However, like its counterpart, International Relations, which seems to have been housed in Political Science as a sub-discipline, International Studies as a title appears to have evolved from History department.

Most institutions where International Studies is offered have it as an addendum of History department. This recent evolution of the title in third world countries from History has influenced the approach to its study and definition. A good number of universities around the world including some in Nigeria also have International Studies as a department. Entire institutes are equally devoted to International Studies. There appears, however, to be a dearth of scholarly literature on the difference between the two titles. International Studies having its origin in History department in most institutions is considered a branch of History. While the long years of Political Science hosting of International Relations title has created a perception of the discipline of International Relations as a branch of Political Science. Consequently, prospective scholars and researchers with interest in the discipline are likely going to find it difficult to make a choice between the titles. A certain level of confusion is created about the difference between the two titles, especially due to the fact that there are departments of International Studies offering the same courses as departments of International Relations and both have the same research methodology.

Moreover, the field of International Studies faces various challenges which include lack of consensus on its theoretical foundations; and fragmentation with scholars and practitioners grappling to define its core identity, scope and methodologies. This study attempts to examine the historical development, theoretical underpinnings, and future trajectories of IS to establish its relevance and adaptability in addressing the pressing needs of the 21st century. Employing the thematic approach, this paper draws on secondary sources and tertiary data to contribute to the ongoing dialogue about IS as a unique and impactful field of study.

### Meaning of International Studies

International Studies refers to an interdisciplinary field of study that explores political, economic, social, and cultural interactions among countries on a global scale. It encompasses various disciplines such as political science, economics, sociology, history, and geography, to provide a comprehensive understanding of international relations and global dynamics. According to Cornelissen et al.<sup>1</sup>, International Studies aims to analyse the complexities of international politics, trade, development, human rights, and conflict resolution to foster cooperation and mutual understanding among nations. Jackson and Sørensen<sup>2</sup>, on their part view International Studies as a discipline that explores the interconnectedness of states, non-state actors, and international organisations in shaping global governance structures and addressing transnational challenges. Scholars in this field examine power dynamics, diplomatic relations, trade agreements, and cultural exchanges to unravel the intricate web of international interactions.



International Studies also delves into the processes of globalisation, migration, and environmental sustainability to assess their impact on national economies, societies, and environments. As noted by Buzan and Little <sup>3</sup>, the multidisciplinary nature of International Studies enables scholars to adopt diverse perspectives and methodologies to analyse global issues from multiple angles, thereby contributing to informed policy decisions and international cooperation. As an academic discipline, International Studies fosters a deeper understanding of global dynamics, promotes cross-cultural dialogue, and offers insights into the complexities of international relations. It plays a crucial role in shaping global governance structures, promoting peace and security, and addressing common challenges faced by the international community.

The Norwich University website describes international studies as a discipline which explores the social and cultural aspects of countries. It goes further to explain that, international studies programmes provide an exploration of the cultural, social, political, and economic issues that affect the people of different countries and regions. <sup>4</sup> Another scholar has also defined International Studies as the study of all historical, economic and political forces which bring together, people, materials and ideas from all parts of the world. International Studies involves all forms of interactions among states and all members of different societies. According to the Marville University Website, “International Studies is the examination of people living all over the globe in our interconnected civilization.”<sup>5</sup> This definition appears to limit the scholarship of International Studies to global demographic study or to study of human beings. Although the website goes on to expatiate more, this conception of International Studies, does not take cognisance of the fact that nation-states, being the major actors in the international environment, are the main subject of international issues. Their policies and conduct have much influence on international phenomenon. For example, the decision of Russia to go to war is of interest to the International Studies scholar. His study is not limited to the people living around the world.

Furthermore, International Studies is viewed by Flinders as a field which examines “societies, cultures, and languages, as well as systems of government and associated relationships.”<sup>6</sup> Scholars of International Relations will agree that this definition equally suits their discipline. Thus, it is not surprising that the Colorado University website quoting Webber goes on to argue that International Studies “sometimes known as international relations or international politics at the university level, ... involves the analysis of political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions that significantly influence international development.”<sup>7</sup> C.J. Trent-Gurbuz also attempts an explanation of the meaning of International Studies. In his work, he argues that “International studies majors explore ways of improving individual countries and the world.” She goes on to explain that an international or global studies major tries to understand globalisation and how it impacts a nation-state’s culture and society. While international relations majors focus on politics and the interactions between countries, international studies majors assess the anthropological, historical and religious aspects of countries. For her, the discipline of International Studies examines the connections between international and regional issues. Students can concentrate on a language and an area of the world while learning how to analyse complex global affairs. The aim of the field is to expand students’ understanding of different cultures and produce graduates interested in finding ways to respond to global challenges.<sup>8</sup> One can discern, however, from York University website that International Studies provides understanding of how governments, law, politics, business, culture, science and the environment relate on the international stage. <sup>9</sup>



Finally, International Studies may also refer to scientific study of all forms of interactions among members of different societies, governmental or non-governmental. It examines all activities - ranging from war, diplomacy, foreign policy to healthcare - among nation-states and other global actors. The discipline is an interdisciplinary field of study. This implies that it draws from other disciplines. Typically, International Studies blends history, economics, political science, healthcare, sociology, law and anthropology in its research and analysis.

### **Historical Development of International Studies**

Relations among international actors, before World War I, were principally studied in two loosely organised disciplines: diplomatic history and international law. The first attempt at studying global phenomenon and events was made in 1919 with the founding of the department of International Politics at Aberystwyth, University of Wales now Aberystwyth University. The first professorship was held by Alfred Echard Zimmern. The chair was endowed by David Davies and his sisters in 1918 and named Woodrow Wilson chair, in honour of the American president by that name. As against what is found in several literature, the department established at the Aberystwyth University in 1919 was not captioned International Relations rather the department was named International Politics.<sup>10</sup>

The field of International Studies (IS) emerged as a distinct academic discipline in the mid-20th century, borne out of the desire to understand global interactions beyond the confines of traditional political frameworks. While IR traditionally focuses on understanding the relationships between nation-states, IS emerged to address a broader scope of global issues, recognising that the world cannot be understood solely through state interactions.<sup>11</sup>

The Cold War played a crucial role in the rise of International Studies, as scholars began to examine not just state interactions but also cultural exchanges, economic dependencies, and social transformations that were reshaping global power structures.<sup>12</sup> As international organisations such as the United Nations and non-state actors became increasingly influential in the global arena, scholars recognised the limitations of traditional IR theories, which were primarily state-centric. This led to a broadening of the discipline to include a focus on transnational actors, human rights, environmental issues, and globalisation, which are central themes within International Studies.<sup>13</sup>

The decolonisation movements of the 1960s and 1970s also contributed to the development of International Studies by prompting scholars to critique Western-centric perspectives. Scholars began to incorporate perspectives from the Global South, emphasising issues like economic inequality, cultural autonomy, and postcolonialism. This allowed International Studies to differentiate itself further from IR, creating space for research on development, migration, and global governance that goes beyond state-level analysis.<sup>14</sup>

It is noteworthy, that the first ever institute of international studies named Graduate Institute of International Studies was founded in 1927 following the establishment of the League of Nations in Geneva at the end of the World War I, and the desire to forestall a new global catastrophe by making diplomacy more transparent and by better training citizens on international issues. This forms the foundation of the discipline titled, International Studies. A professor of Economic History at the University of Geneva, William Rappard, was the brain behind establishment of the institute. He envisioned the Institute to serve two purposes, namely: to meet international institutions' needs by training their staff and by providing them



with relevant expertise; and on the other hand, to provide students with a keen grasp of international affairs. Paul Mantoux, another professor of Economic History, was appointed as the first director of the Graduate Institute of International Studies.

The institute is regarded as the first institution in the world to be entirely devoted to the study of international relations. It offered one of the first PhD programmes in international relations in the world. In the 1950s, the Institute expanded under the headship of Jacques Freymond. Based on changes in the international community, this expansion took into cognisance the history of communism and the Cold War, stressing multilateral diplomacy, strategic studies, trade and international monetary economics, as well as third-world and development issues. Jacques Freymond established the Geneva African Institute, as well as international relations institutes in Trinidad and Tobago, Nairobi, Yaoundé and later in Malta.<sup>15</sup>

### **Scope and Sub-Fields of International Studies**

The Marville University website explains that its degree in international studies includes politics, economics, communications, art, religion, and even literature. It incorporates foreign languages, policies, and governments, and considers the architecture, legislation, beliefs, healthcare, and business practices of different nations.<sup>16</sup> The Jackson School of International Studies has its scope focused on the “political, historical and cultural contexts that shape global challenges such as inequality, climate change, security and human rights.” International Studies Programme also incorporates intercultural communication and language proficiency,<sup>17</sup> International Diplomacy and Peace Studies, regional studies such as African Studies, comparative Cultures, International Economic Affairs, Global Gender Studies and Research Intelligence Analyst.<sup>18</sup>

Quincy Wright asserts that the study of International Relations should include cultural organisations and religious organisations. He also stresses as follow:

....For a proper understanding of international relations, one has to include such partial studies as international politics, international law, international organisation, international economics, international ethics, the psychology and sociology of international relations, world history, political geography, political demography, and technology.<sup>19</sup>

The above emphasis aligns with the scope of International Studies. Moreover, the encyclopedia of Political Science enumerates the following as constituting the scope of International Relations: state system, relations in conflict and cooperation, general and diplomatic history, power, international law, international organisations, international systems, integration and community approach., geopolitics, conflict management and conflict resolution, war and peace, national interest, ideologies, nationalism, colonialism, and imperialism, foreign policy, policy-making, national character, psychological factors, military-strategic factors, alliances and groupings, arms control and disarmament, demographic factors, economic factors, area and regional studies.<sup>20</sup>

It is important to note that scholarship in International Relations and International Studies is greatly influenced by literature on International Politics. This is because the discipline relies much on the works of the early scholars most of whom had background in International Politics. These include scholars like E. H. Carr, Kenneth Waltz, Hans J. Morgenthau, and Quincy Wright among others. International Politics is often seen as a subfield of International





Relations, focusing specifically on state interactions, diplomacy, security, and power dynamics.

One can understand from the discussion above that International Studies is a discipline with a broad scope which covers different subfields that address various aspects of international relations and global problems. These subfields include international law, international relations (IR), global governance, human rights and humanitarianism, environmental studies and sustainability, technology and cyberspace, regional and area studies, strategic studies, war and peace etc. Let us look at some of these subfields briefly.

International relations and global governance are some of the primary aspects of IS. It focuses on the dynamics of power, diplomacy, and conflict between states and other global actors. Topics such as global governance, international organisations like the United Nations and the role of non-state actors (e.g., multinational corporations and NGOs) fall under this category. These studies are crucial for understanding how global policies are negotiated and implemented. For instance, the development of institutions like the World Trade Organisation reflects efforts to create rules-based systems for economic cooperation.<sup>21</sup>

Another area of IS is international law. It is the cornerstone of IS, serving as the legal framework that governs interactions between states and other international entities. It encompasses treaties, customary laws, and legal principles aimed at maintaining peace and fostering cooperation. International law addresses a wide range of issues, including human rights, environmental protection, the use of force, and the resolution of disputes.<sup>22</sup> The evolution of international law highlights its growing significance. For example, the establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2002 marked a milestone in holding individuals accountable for war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity.<sup>23</sup> International law is a critical tool for promoting global justice and stability.

There is also the subfield of human rights and humanitarianism, which explores how international norms and practices protect individuals and communities. This area often intersects with international law, as conventions like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) serve as benchmarks for global standards.<sup>24</sup> Humanitarian studies also address the roles of organisations such as the Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières in responding to crises like armed conflicts and natural disasters.

The increasing urgency of global environmental issues has elevated the importance of environmental studies within IS. Topics such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and sustainable development are central to this subfield. Agreements like the Paris Accord exemplify international efforts to address environmental challenges collectively.<sup>25</sup> Scholars in this area analyse the interplay between environmental policies and economic development, offering insights into achieving sustainable solutions.

Furthermore, there are emerging areas in IS such as technology and cyberspace. The rapid advancement of technology has introduced new dimensions to IS. The subfield of cyberspace studies examines issues such as cybersecurity, the regulation of artificial intelligence, and the digital divide. These emerging topics reflect the evolving nature of IS and its responsiveness to contemporary global challenges.



Strategic Studies is another significant branch of International Studies. It deals with the role of power, particularly military and economic power, in shaping international relations and ensuring security. Emerging prominently during the Cold War, it focuses on the strategies states and non-state actors employ to achieve political objectives, prevent conflict, or prevail in warfare. The discipline draws heavily on historical, political, and theoretical analyses to understand the complexities of conflict and the use of force in international affairs. Foundational concepts, such as deterrence theory and the balance of power, have shaped its development, with early contributions from theorists like Carl von Clausewitz and modern institutions like the RAND Corporation.<sup>26</sup> Over time, Strategic Studies has expanded its focus to include issues like asymmetric warfare, cyber security, and the strategic implications of emerging technologies, reflecting the evolving nature of global conflicts and security concerns. It informs policy decisions related to national defence, arms control, and international cooperation. For instance, contemporary challenges such as the Ukraine conflict, the rise of China as a global power, and the proliferation of advanced weaponry underscore the need for strategic frameworks that address both traditional and non-traditional threats.<sup>27</sup> Strategic Studies remains an indispensable lens through which scholars and policymakers address the complexities of power and security in an increasingly interconnected world.

## METHODOLOGY

International Studies (IS) employs a diverse range of methodologies, reflecting its interdisciplinary nature and its subject matter. The field draws on both qualitative and quantitative methods, with each approach offering unique insights into global phenomena. Qualitative methods, such as case studies, ethnography, and historical analysis, are widely used to explore the cultural, political, and historical dimensions of international issues. These methods are particularly valuable in understanding the specific contexts and nuanced dynamics of regions, institutions, or conflicts. For example, in the study of peace processes, qualitative approaches can provide in-depth analyses of negotiations and cultural sensitivities that shape outcomes.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, quantitative methods, including statistical analysis, surveys, and computational modeling, are employed to identify patterns, test hypotheses, and predict trends. These methods are often used in studies of economic globalisation, migration flows, or international trade, where numerical data can reveal broader systemic dynamics.<sup>29</sup>

Mixed-method approaches are increasingly common in IS, as they enable scholars to integrate the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative paradigms. For instance, researchers might combine statistical analyses of conflict data with interviews of key stakeholders to gain a holistic understanding of war and peace dynamics.<sup>30</sup> Comparative studies also hold a central place in IS methodologies, allowing researchers to identify similarities and differences across countries, regions, or historical periods. However, IS methodologies are not without challenges. The interdisciplinary nature of the field often requires scholars to navigate diverse academic traditions and integrate perspectives from political science, sociology, economics, and history. Moreover, issues such as data accessibility, language barriers, and cultural sensitivity pose significant obstacles, particularly in cross-national and cross-cultural research.<sup>31</sup> Despite these challenges, the methodological diversity of IS reflects its adaptability and relevance in addressing the complex, interconnected issues of the contemporary world.



Worthy of note is that, International Studies may be one of two or more courses offered by a department or faculty in a given institutions. The approaches and research methodology of the faculty or department housing the discipline influence its research methodology and approaches. Hence, where International Studies is offered as a major within the faculty of administration its primary research methodology will be quantitative methodology. On the other hand where International Studies is taken as a major the faculty of arts and humanities, its preferred methodology will be qualitative methodology. But as mentioned above, the topic one has to deal with determines to a large extent the methodology one adopts.

### **Relevance of International Studies in the 21st Century**

International Studies (IS) remains highly relevant in the 21st century as it provides essential tools and frameworks for understanding and addressing the interconnected challenges of the modern world. Globalisation has intensified the interdependence of nations, creating a need for nuanced approaches to international cooperation and problem-solving. Issues such as climate change, global health crises, migration, and the rise of transnational terrorism demand interdisciplinary perspectives that IS uniquely offers.<sup>32</sup> For example, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the critical need for international coordination in managing public health emergencies, illustrating how IS can contribute to understanding the intersections of global governance, public policy, and science. Similarly, the growing prominence of international organisations, such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organisation, underscores the need for scholars and practitioners who can navigate the complexities of multilateral diplomacy and global governance.<sup>33</sup>

International Studies, in addition to addressing global challenges, also equips individuals and institutions to adapt to rapid technological, economic, and geopolitical changes. The increasing role of technology in international affairs, from cybersecurity threats to the digital economy, requires innovative approaches to regulation and cooperation. Furthermore, the shifting balance of power, with the rise of nations like China and India, has reshaped global politics, making the study of regional dynamics and multipolarity critical.<sup>34</sup> IS programmes also play a vital role in preparing professionals for careers in diplomacy, international development, human rights advocacy, and global business, ensuring that they possess the interdisciplinary skills needed to operate in a rapidly changing global landscape. IS contributes to building a more informed and responsive global citizenry deepening understanding of international systems, cultures, and conflicts, thus making it indispensable in the 21st century.

### **CONCLUSION**

International Studies, as noted in the definitions is an interdisciplinary discipline one which integrates various disciplines. A look through the prospectus and websites of some institutions offering either International Relations or International Studies will show variation in scope. The two titles, International Studies and International Relations is a matter of nomenclature. By and large, the scope of the discipline depends on the institutions. Findings in this research show that institutions across the world offer International Studies either as social science course or humanities course and the research methodology of the faculty or department housing the discipline influences its research methodology and approaches.





Similarly the scope of International Studies varies from institution to institution but all institutions have as part of their scope, common theme of forms of interactions and issues having global impact and significance.

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