ÅRSRAPPORT FRA PROGRAMSENSOR 2024

University of Bergen   December 15, 2024
Department of Health Promotion and Development

Annual report from the programme auditor
Name of auditor: Professor Lennart Nygren, Programme auditor at University of Bergen, Department of Health Promotion and Development (HEMIL) for the programmes Mastergrad in Barnevern (Child protection and welfare) and Mastergrad i Barnevernsarbeid (Child welfare work).
Period of appointment: 2024-2028.
Period to which the report applies: 2024.

The task for the programme auditor of 2024

The task for the auditor this year has been to have a closer look at the programmes' first subject – MABVA402, *Barnevernet sine beslutningsprosessar og rettslær.* The subject runs parallel within the master's in child protection and the master's in child welfare work. The programmes run in October to December 2024. The subject is designed to deal with decision-making processes and jurisprudence. It has been reported that both students and staff experience some challenges since the subject has an assessment with two parts; one that is a legal part-examination organized (nationally for all master's programmes in child welfare in Norway) by NOKUT, and the other is a home exam organized by the HEMIL Department which deals with decision-making processes. This audit will be focused on the interplay between these two different assessments. As I understand it the challenges for students (and staff) is that it has been difficult to achieve optimal learning conditions and that this besides time stress is reflected in the results of the students. Additionally, I have had a look into the literature of the course. I will give a comment to this at the end of this review.

All over Norway, 300 master's students in child welfare had a national part-examination in jurisprudence in child welfare December 6, 2023. On this occasion, 46 percent were failing the exam, which was assessed as pass or fail. The percentage that failed was high in several of the Norwegian masters' programmes even if there were exceptions where all students achieved a pass (e.g. HVL). The results of the 2024 national NOKUT exams are, when this audit report is published, not known (exam date was December 4 and censorship deadline is on January 7, 2025).

The course *Barnevernet sine beslutningsprosessar og rettslær* (15 credits) contains the social mandate of child welfare, decision processes, children's and families' rights, legal methods and legal sources. At University of Bergen some adaptations and modifications have been carried out the past year, after the 2023 exams, but according to both student and staff, the combination of a local home exam and the national NOKUT exam is still challenging. The course plan, time plan and other written resources and guidelines for the course that I as auditor have had access to indicate, together with oral information from at a short online meeting with students and staff November 11, 2024, several conflicts related to the organisation and implementation of the course. These are, in short:

A. The high demands on the national one-day NOKUT exam (equal to five out of fifteen credits) requires preparations that appears to make it into a struggle for the students to allocate enough time to the two different course parts. The high proportion of students failing in the NOKUT exam in 2023 appears to coincide with a time pressure, leading to not being able to work hard enough with the home exam. So, students seem to be caught between the necessary preparations for the NOKUT exam (and quite a few students failed with this) and working on the home exam on decision processes. As I understand it, the students experienced it as stressful to write the home exam and immediately after submitting this, start the intensive preparations for the national NOKUT exam.

B. A second aspect that might add to the stress is the different forms of grading where the home exam is graded with the scale A-F while the NOKUT exam is either pass or fail. The two different scales mean different thresholds in the grading scales regarding failure. This can lead to students regard it as necessary to prioritise the NOKUT exam before the home exam.

C. The teaching form in this course consists of a mixture of lectures and seminars including working with case methodology. The idea is to alternate the legal content with the more decision theoretical and administrative (dealing) content in a way that connects the two types of content logically. This is obviously a well-motivated idea that supports student learning and preparing for professional judgment, but that also leads to that some of the content appears a rather long time before the exam. Anyway, it is not necessarily a problem, but it may require repetition a few weeks after the lectures and seminars.

D. Thanks to the organisation of the course in this way (to alternate the two different contents) the course is built up thematically with relevant themes for both the cases in the seminars and for the tasks in the home exams. A question is if this thematization creates confusion in relation to the national NOKUT exam, that might be somewhat differently thematized. Whether this is a problem can be discussed.

It is not yet known how the outcome of the NOKUT exams this year (2024) will be. In 2023 there was large variation between the different Norwegian masters' programmes in child welfare and child welfare work where some had over 50% of their students failing, while others had significantly less (as mentioned, HVL with 0%). The reasons for this variation can be many: from differences in the organisation of the programmes to variations in how much students work outside the university parallel to their studies. So, in a way it is a bit premature to suggest any changes before the current exams of 2024 are finished. But it is possible

to outline different strategies for the development of the programmes. Some alternative options are:

i)   A first option would be to modify the structure of the course so that preparations for exams start earlier and go parallel to lectures and seminars. There could be room for small adjustments of the time plan to find more time and/or to provide more support to the students in preparations for the NOKUT exam. A question is whether it would be possible to improve the preparation with inspirations from other masters' programmes in Norway where the rate of failures was low. Also, after January 2025 there will be new and more experiences available to learn from. This option is perhaps the best in the short run. It requires limited planning and administrative work from the Department, and the students will recognise the model of learning from previous semesters. Depending on how serious the experiences from the fall semester 2024 will be, it can be an attractive step-by-step way to go.

ii)   A second option would be to create a total separation of the decision-making content from the legal/jurisprudence (NOKUT-related) content. This would mean to begin with the first part and ending it after ca 2/3 of the course including writing the home exam, before introducing and teaching the legal content as a second part and ending this part with the national exam (1/3 of the course). This would need more planning and new ways to coordinate the two parts of the course. A risk would be that the integration that is achieved in today's time plan regarding lectures and seminars with case methods becomes more difficult and weaker.

iii)   A third option is to do nothing, and to accept and live with that one part of the course is more demanding and difficult than the other. Many education programs experience such differences. For example (which may be seen as a peripheral example) the courses in physical chemistry were for decades more demanding than other chemistry courses, but this was accepted by the students. They expected that half or so of the group would fail in the first attempt – it was just a more difficult content. To translate this into the child welfare and child welfare work masters' programmes would mean to maintain the pressure on students to prepare more for the NOKUT exam and simultaneously maintaining the high demands on the decision-making part. Lowering the demands on either part seems to be a questionable solution.

A general issue that has some relevance is the relationship between law and child welfare practice. This concern is shared with several other profession education programs, such as social work, nursing, police work, business economics etc. Over the years there has been different more or less integrated education programs, but it seems that the teaching of law has always been considered as crucial, even if the emphasis sometimes has been on broader approaches, other times delimited to more narrowly defined content[1].
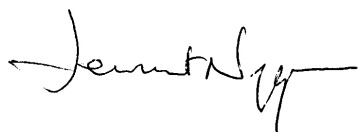
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[1] An example with references to the Swedish debate is illustrated in Nygren, L. (2021) Kontroversteman i kunskapsbildningen i socialt arbete i Sverige. I Swärd, H. & Edebalk, PG (red.) *Socionomutbildningen – då, nu och i framtiden.* Lund: Studentlitteratur, sid. 341-378.

A second task for the auditor this year was to have a look at the literature and if possible, make some suggestions. I have investigated some international and Swedish course materials (see the attached list of literature that may be of interest). My main impression is that the literature that is used in the masters' programmes is adequate and advanced. The research environment of the HEMIL Department is engaged in producing high standard and relevant research, which guarantees that students will have access to the research frontier, and to teachers that have the overview and competence to teach in relation the themes of decision making and legal conditions for child welfare.

With today's rapid development of the utilisation of artificial intelligence as support to decision making in many areas, AI is increasingly being used in complex decisions such as child welfare. It might be a relevant idea to investigate the growing literature here, to see how students can, with a critical mind, think of utilising AI in child welfare decision making[2].

In general, an idea might be to add more literature about decision theory (see also attached list), since we in this field deal with discretionary decision making that requires knowledge on many levels: legal, organisational, theoretical, (inter-)professional and practical.

Umeå 15 december 2024

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Appendix - A list of literature that may be of interest. Several of the titles here are probably already known to the staff of the masters' programmes.

Alexius, K. (2022). Vad är barnets bästa när rättsprinciper kolliderar? En studie av principkollisioner i bedömningar av tvångsvårdade barns relation till ursprungsföräldrar. *Retfærd. Nordisk Juridisk Tidsskrift*, *174*(4), 25-42.

Bosk, E. A. (2020). What counts? Quantification, worker judgment, and divergence in child welfare decision making. In *Human Service Organizations and the Question of Impact* (pp. 93-112). Routledge.

Christiansen, Ø., Havnen, K. J. S., Iversen, A. C., Fylkesnes, M. K., Lauritzen, C., Nygård, R. H., & Vis, S. A. (2019). Når barnevernet undersøker-Barnevernets undersøkelsesarbeid-delrapport 4.

Forkby, T., & Höjer, S. (2011). Navigations between regulations and gut instinct: The unveiling of collective memory in decision-making processes where teenagers are placed in residential care. *Child & Family Social Work*, *16*(2), 159-168.

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[2] See for example Kawakami, A., et al. (2022). Improving human-AI partnerships in child welfare: understanding worker practices, challenges, and desires for algorithmic decision support (see attached reference list).

Gillingham, P., & Whittaker, A. (2023). How Can Research and Theory Enhance Understanding of Professional Decision-Making in Reviews of Cases of Child Death and Serious Injury? *The British journal of social work, 53(1),* pp. 5–22

Hardenstedt, H., Linde, S., & Ponnert, L. (2024). Aiming for participation of foster children within organizationally specialized social services: a bureaucratic or a relational act?. *Nordic Social Work Research*, 1-15.

Hestbæk, A. D., Höjer, I., Pösö, T., & Skivenes, M. (2020). Child welfare removal of infants: Exploring policies and principles for decision-making in Nordic countries. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *108*, 104572.

Kawakami, A., Sivaraman, V., Cheng, H. F., Stapleton, L., Cheng, Y., Qing, D., ... & Holstein, K. (2022). Improving human-AI partnerships in child welfare: understanding worker practices, challenges, and desires for algorithmic decision support. In *Proceedings of the 2022 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 1-18).

Keddell, E. (2014). Current debates on variability in child welfare decision-making: A selected literature review. *Social Sciences*, *3*(4), 916-940.

Kraus, M., Burghardt, J., & Koska, C. (2024). AI-assisted reflection in child welfare. *Edition Moderne Postmoderne*, 63.

Mattsson, T. (2016). Juridik och socialt arbete. I Meeuwisse, A., Swärd, H., Sunesson, S. & Knutagård, M. (red.) *Socialt arbete. En grundbok.* Stockholm: Natur & Kultur. 3:e omarbetade upplagan,198-215.

Munro, E. (2019). Decision-making under uncertainty in child protection: Creating a just and learning culture. *Child & Family Social Work*, *24*(1), 123-130.

Przeperski, J., & Taylor, B. (2022). Cooperation in child welfare decision making: Qualitative vignette study. *Child Care in practice*, *28*(2), 137-152.

Ponnert, Lina (2024). *Utredningsarbete i den sociala barnavården*. Malmö: Gleerups. 191 s.

Ponnert, L. (2023). Mellan rättslig reglering och professionell logik:–att hantera orosanmälningar om våld i barnavården. *Socialvetenskaplig tidskrift*, *30*(1), 415-434.

Sletten, M. S. (2024). Proceduralisation of decision-making processes: a case study of child welfare practice. *Nordic Social Work Research*, *14*(1), 149-161.

Starcke, K., & Brand, M. (2012). Decision making under stress: a selective review. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, *36*(4), 1228-1248.

Taylor, B. J. (2021). Risk-managing decision-making: A psycho-social rationality model. *The British Journal of Social Work*, *51*(7), 2819-2838.

Toros, K. (2021). Children's participation in decision making from child welfare workers' perspectives: A systematic review. *Research on Social Work Practice*, *31*(4), 367-374.