Programme review report for GLODE330 and responses from GLODE staff

Report by Axel Borchgrevink, November 2023

This is the third year that I have the role of programme reviewer for GLODE. This year's task consisted of assessing the thesis course GLODE 330 (30 credits). I was given the following inputs:

1. Review updated requirements for 30 ECTs thesis (for example the addition of writing in pairs. NB! We have not had any students write in pairs yet)
2. Evaluation of theses, including control assessment of two theses in each specialisation (one high and one low quality thesis in each – see attachments in email)
3. Student evaluations (perhaps including a conversation with graduated students if possible)

It was agreed that I would solely focus on the 30-credit course, as the 60-credit course was anyway being phased out. I did not visit Bergen this year but have had phone interviews with GLODE staff Helga Bjørnøy Urke and Haldis Haukanes, as well as two students who submitted their theses this spring. Both were from the gender specialization, but they had taken different methods courses (quantitative and qualitative). In addition, I have had access to documents such as course description, internal course evaluations, supervision agreement form, guidelines for examiners, and four theses.

In the following, my observations are organized along the timeline of the student master work. Tentative recommendations are presented interspersed in the text in italics. I emphasize that these are the suggestions of an outsider, based on limited knowledge of the programme. They could be mistaken or irrelevant due to incomplete information, misunderstandings, and lack of knowledge of the available resources for the programme. The report should be read with this in mind.

Choosing theme for thesis project
Students are asked to choose the topic for the thesis early in the second semester. This allows supervisors to be assigned and the students to develop their initial version of the project description in parallel with the methods courses in the second semester. Students expressed that this was experienced as early in the programme and therefore challenging (although they understood that it was necessary).

As GLODE does not have great problems with students not finishing their thesis work on time (as, on contrary, we experience in our development studies master's degree IDEAS at OsloMet), this may not be a great issue that needs addressing. At OsloMet, though, we have found it *useful to arrange seminars that force them to think about possible themes early in the programme.* This could be student-organized and led, where ideas for thesis projects could be aired and discussed. At OsloMet we have also had presentations by the supervision staff on their areas of expertise and suggestions for thesis themes. It would also be possible to have a few of the second-year students who have completed their data collection present their projects to the first-year students sometime in January.

GLODE response:
We welcome this suggestion as we experience many students being unsure about the process of choosing a thesis topic. We do address this at the beginning of the first semester with presentations of staff and their research areas as well as examples of previous thesis topics. Towards the end of the

first semester, we have a seminar where students present and get feedback on their topic ideas. We will however consider making this even more structured and focused to facilitate that students start the process of shaping their topic. Regarding visits from second year students, we have also organized this in various ways, e.g., in the first course (GLODE300) in the first semester. This has been very successful and something that we will continue, and perhaps also expand by inviting second year students to present early in the second semester for example as part of seminar in the methods course.

Co-writing the thesis

GLODE has introduced the possibility for two students to write their thesis together. The main rationale is to save teaching resources for supervision and assessment. So far, no students have chosen this option. It has been suggested to make this mandatory. This seems to me to be a risky move. Co-writing is great as an option for those who want to do so, but forcing everybody to do it will in all probability have negative repercussions on student motivation and completion time. In my opinion, ***introducing incentive for students to write together would be a better way of doing this***. I don't know what incentives could be given, though.

GLODE response:

We are completely in agreement with this recommendation and have decided to go back to strongly encouraging students to write together rather than requiring it. The current formulation is now: <u>"Students are expected to write their thesis in pairs, but exemptions can be made if circumstances require it."</u> Introducing the option of writing in pairs has been a process also for the GLODE staff, and we are planning to be even clearer in our communication with students from the start of the first semester that this is what is encouraged and provide clear guidelines to give students a good understanding of what it entails and time to pair up with peers. We see co-writing as providing several opportunities and benefits. For example, considering the short time available for a 30-credit thesis (one semester), data collection and working with the data material can be more elaborate since two people are devoted to it. At the same time, we acknowledge that there could be drawbacks in having all students write in pairs. We have a diverse group with various disciplinary backgrounds that can make co-writing challenging. For some students it can limit future academic opportunities when the thesis is both a short (30 ECTS) thesis and co-written. We will therefore consider how to phrase and implement the expectation of co-writing.

Supervision

The students I have spoken to talked very positively about the supervision, both in terms of the amount of supervision offered and the usefulness of the support received. It was reported, though, that there were other students who had had more mixed experiences with their supervisors. Also, one student mentioned that while the supervisor was excellent in advising om methodological issues, he/she had less expertise when it came to the specialization and its way of using theories and perspectives. ***In such cases, the use of co-supervisors could be considered.***

GLODE response:

This is a good point, and we will aim to have a more structured/formalised supervisor collaboration in the instances where the main supervisor is not an expert in either the specialization or methodology.

For staff, one way of reducing the supervision burden is to have group supervision. The students I talked to had had both individual and group supervision and were happy with that combination. They felt that group supervision gave the opportunity to learn from fellow students and their way of grappling with issues that were similar for many of the students. ***The combination of individual and group supervision should be continued.***

GLODE response:
We will continue the combination of individual and group supervision as far as possible.

At OsloMet, many supervisors require the students to write brief minutes on what was agreed and recommended in each (individual) supervision session. Having this written down has proved useful for both students and supervisors. Students interviewed agreed that this would have been useful in order to ensure that all that was said in supervision was retained. **Something to consider also for the GLODE supervisors?**

GLODE response:
We think this can be a good solution but think that it should be up to the individual supervisor to implement as they see fit. Some of us who have tried this previously have the experience that it generates more work for the supervisor who must follow up that minutes are actually written etc.

Developing the thesis project and data collection
The students I talked with said that the methods course in the second semester had been useful for developing their projects. One of them reported that the methods proposal written during the course could be used without major revisions in the thesis (even if the thesis topic had been changed in the meantime). Such connection between coursework and thesis is a strength of the programme.

As I understand it, quite a few of the students revise or change their chosen topic for the thesis. Often it is the internship period which offers new inspiration and contacts that lead to a new focus, or it can be the realization that fieldwork or accessing data for the original theme is complicated. It is positive that the programme and its supervisors are flexible to allow such changes and supportive in developing a revised project. At the same time such changes require extra efforts from the student. I am not sure what could be done, but **the GLODE staff could reflect on whether reorganization of the programme structure could alleviate such problems**. Could internship come earlier (or students start preparing internships earlier so that they would know what kind of placement they could expect)? Could students be required to start to investigate data collection possibilities during the methods course, in order to make more informed choices?

GLODE response:
Although it is true that some students change topics after the second semester, they are quite few. However, it is a challenge that students sometimes start too late with data collection (even when the topic is the same). Since the methods courses are organized across four master's programmes, it is not realistic to restructure the order of the courses (e.g., switching internship and methods course). More systematic efforts could perhaps be made to have students prepare their projects even more in the second semester. As a response to this challenge, we have also recently developed an explicit timeline that we will introduce to students in the second semester to prepare students even more.

All students were recommended to complete data collection or get access the data to be used by the start of the fourth semester. While many students were able to do this, others encountered challenges and continued this process into the final semester when they were supposed to be focused on writing their thesis. The result is often too little time for writing and lower quality of the thesis. **The programme should continue to encourage students to complete data collection by January, maybe also reinforce the encouragement and incentives for this.** One way of doing so could be to require students to report to supervisors at certain points during the third semester on how preparations for data collection were proceeding.

GLODE response:
We very much agree and appreciate this suggestion. We see an opportunity for making the supervision in the 3rd semester more structured, e.g., by having students develop a timeline for

progress on data collection and with deadlines for reporting on progress with the plan. As mentioned above, we have also recently developed an explicit timeline that we will introduce to students in the second semester to prepare students even more.

Thesis writing

In addition to supervision (individually and in groups), there are thesis writing seminars, consisting of lectures on different stages of thesis writing and of student presentations of texts they are writing. These are held three times during the fourth semester. All students are required to present texts they are writing, and to be the commentator for another student's text (sometimes this is done in group supervision meetings.

Students were happy with these arrangements (although wishing there could have been more seminars). My impression is that GLODE succeeds in creating positive team spirit, in the class as a whole, as well as in the smaller quant/qual methods classes and supervision groups. Students reported learning much from discussing common writing challenges with their fellow students. I was also told that they were recommended to create smaller groups for mutual support among themselves, but that this did not really happen without initiatives from the teaching staff. One student suggested that **booking rooms for such meetings at specific times could be a way for the staff to encourage the formation of such groups?**

GLODE response:

We think that it is important to ensure that students have peer contact during the writing semester and through this increase progress in the thesis work. We have the organized seminars in the course in addition to group supervision and we will continue to encourage students to engage in colloquiums.

The interviewed staff expressed that in general, students were quite good at submitting their theses on time. (As mentioned above, here GLODE is much more successful that OsloMet's IDEAS programme.) The four theses I have reviewed all held more-than-acceptable standards and a couple of them were really good. Thus, judging from the end products, the GLODE 330 seems to be well-designed and well-functioning programme. **The main recommendation is therefore not to tinker too much with it!**

Concluding the programme

The students I interviewed reported that after submitting the thesis, there was no feedback other than the final grade. While they knew it was possible to ask for an explanation of the grade, none of them did so. **My recommendation would be that GLODE introduces an oral examination in connection with the thesis.** This will give the students an understanding of how the significant work they have submitted has been read by the examiners and constitutes an appropriate ritual to the completion of the master's degree. At the same time, it allows for a check and opportunity to adjust grades in the new era of artificial intelligence. Also, with increased possibilities of arranging online oral examinations, this need not involve the costs it used to, or require that international students remain in Norway while waiting for their final examination.

Should this not be possible for economic or other reasons, then at least a written assessment of the thesis by the examiners should be given to the student along with the grade.

GLODE response:

We see the value that an oral examination could have, especially as opportunities for using artificial intelligence increase. However, because the Faculty of Psychology is in a constrained financial

situation, we do not see this as realistic. We will however consider introducing a written report from the assessment. This would have to be formalized in the guidelines for examiners, e.g., presented as an alternative to oral examination.