

ANNUAL PROGRAMME CENSOR'S REPORT

Master's Programme in Comparative Politics, Faculty of Social Sciences,
University of Bergen

Assessment period: Spring-Autumn 2010

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INTRODUCTION

Based on the guidelines for programme censors issued by the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Bergen, the purpose of this report is to assess the Master's programme in Comparative Politics. The evaluation criteria specified in the guidelines include an evaluation of the programme of studies taken as a whole, of specific courses and of assessment practices. In addition, the Department of Comparative Politics has asked me specifically to focus on the "overall structure of the Master's programme and the balance between its components" in this report.

The report draws on the following material:

- written documentation (informasjonshefte for programsensor) about the structure of the Master's programme in Comparative Politics, incl. reading lists for individual courses and information about assessment and grade distributions
- meetings with the academic staff and a group of second year Master's students during a visit to the department on 8 October 2010
- written summary information about proposed changes to the programme structure

The report is structured as follows. In accordance with the guidelines the main emphasis is on a holistic assessment of the programme and the balance between its components. The first section provides a brief outline of the core features of the Master's programme in Comparative Politics as well as an overall assessment of the programme. The second section highlights the distinctive features and core strengths of the programme at Bergen in comparative perspective. In the following section a number of areas which receive less emphasis at Bergen than in some other comparable programmes are identified. The final section concludes.

1. GENERAL STRUCTURE OF THE PROGRAMME

The two-year Master's programme in Comparative Politics at the University of Bergen consists of 120 credits (studiepoeng), and the basic structure of the programme is as follows:

Semester 1: During this semester students take two required courses, namely SAMPOL304: Comparative Methods (Komparative metodar, 15 credits) and SAMPOL305: Multivariate Data Analysis (Multivariat dataanalyse, 15 credits).

Semester 2: In the second semester students are required to choose two 15 credit options from a list of research-led units, which may include the following: SAMPOL311: Politics and Economics *or* Advanced Regression Analysis; SAMPOL315: Institutionalizing democratic representation *or* Elections and Representation; SAMPOL316: Law, Politics and Democracy; SAMPOL318: European Politics/EU: a UFO?; SAMPOL322: Welfare and Democracy (Velferd og demokrati)

Semesters 3 and 4: During the second year of the programme students write a 60 credit dissertation.

The general programme structure is clear and well thought out. Each unit has a detailed reading list, and the learning objectives are clearly specified. The course content of some of the units seems to vary from year to year. For example, there are two distinct unit descriptions and reading lists for each version of SAMPOL 311 (Politics and Economics & Advanced Regression Analysis). Additional written guidance is provided where appropriate, notably to dissertation writers.

Judging by the reading lists and unit descriptions, the programme maintains a high international standard both in terms of quality and rigour. The department is to be commended for linking the provision of optional courses to existing research clusters. This should promote research-led teaching and facilitate the integration of students into the general research culture of the department. The range of options reflects the strengths of the department and ensures that a number of sub-fields of the discipline are represented. The assigned readings are a mix of canonical writings and recent academic contributions to the literature of a given field by Norwegian and international scholars. In terms of course content, the units are of a good standard in both theoretical and empirical terms. The level is appropriate for a Master's programme in Comparative Politics.

While there are a variety of assessment methods for the individual units, they consistently reflect good assessment practice. Many units integrate a research element, as students are not merely required to complete a standard assignment, but have the opportunity to write a research paper. The department reflects extensively on assessment practices, and it has also provided the programme censor with detailed reports and analyses of the grade distribution and assessment. In light of these documents the assessment practices are transparent and clear.

It should be noted that every Master's programme in Comparative Politics has some unique features. It is increasingly recognised by universities that there is a need for some specialisation and for the development of 'niches' where specific programmes have a comparative advantage. However, this also means that other areas will inevitably receive less emphasis. While this is generally a good thing, it is worth periodically reflecting on the rationale for emphasising some areas at the possible expense of others. In what follows, I shall focus on what I perceive to be the unique features of the Bergen Master's programme, including, first, the core strengths of the programme and then areas which receive less attention.

2. DISTINCTIVE STRENGTHS OF THE PROGRAMME

In light of the material about the department which is at my disposal, three distinctive strengths stand out, namely a strong research focus, high-quality research training and emphasis on advanced quantitative methods. These three areas will be discussed in turn.

First, the Master's programme at Bergen puts a heavy emphasis on research. The entire second year, i.e. 50% of the programme, is devoted to an original research project. This project receives more weight and is more central to the programme structure than in most universities I am familiar with, where the Master's dissertation may account for 25-35% of the total programme. Judging by the enthusiasm expressed by the second-year Master's students, they value this element of the programme highly. Several people mentioned that this had attracted them to the programme, and they also praised the department's size and friendliness as well as the academic staff's commitment to supervision as conducive to research. While I have not read any dissertations, the scope and ambition of the projects described to me during my visit seemed impressive.

Secondly, the department clearly puts heavy emphasis on research training. The entire first semester (25%) of the programme is devoted to research design and quantitative methods. In some years an optional unit on advanced quantitative methods is also available in the second semester. Therefore the proportion of coursework devoted to research design and methods is higher than in many MA programmes in Europe or North America. Judging by the unit descriptions and reading lists, the quality of these units is high. Given the great emphasis placed on individual research as part of this programme, it is commendable and probably essential to provide students with a solid introduction to research methods and the design of research.

Thirdly, the Master's programme also has a clear strength in quantitative methods. Not only are quantitative methods compulsory - which is the case in an increasing number of MA programmes in Comparative Politics worldwide, but probably not in a majority of programmes - they are also taught at a comparatively advanced level. Unlike many programmes with either optional or required quantitative methods components, it would be very difficult to embark on Master's studies in comparative politics at Bergen without a good

undergraduate training in intermediate statistical methods. While this may be the norm at Bergen, this feature of the programme does stand out in an international comparison. Statistical training is often optional at the undergraduate level even at top universities, and the compulsory courses at the Master's level (or even PhD level) are often taught at a more introductory level than at Bergen. Such a high level of training in quantitative methods should facilitate student engagement with advanced journal articles and also the use of statistical methods in their research projects.

3. AREAS RECEIVING LESS EMPHASIS

In contrast to the above-mentioned focus areas of the department, some other aspects of the field receive comparatively less attention than at other universities. Again three areas stand out, namely the lack of substantive pathways and of substantive core units and the relatively limited attention to qualitative methods.

First, while the department has a nice range of research-led options, there are no standardised pathways. Given that there is some variation from year to year in the list of available optional courses, the student experience in terms of the substantive knowledge acquired is also likely to vary somewhat. While some turnover of optional units exists at practically all universities, there are often substantive pathways, e.g. focusing on democratisation, political economy or a specific region, for which there is always a menu of options available. Sometimes student opt for a particular pathway at the time when they submit their applications. Since the full range of options for a given year may not be known at the time when prospective students apply to Bergen, they may therefore be more likely to be attracted to Bergen by the generic research training that is offered. By contrast, at many other universities specific sub-disciplinary pathways or a set of substantive courses are often decisive in attracting students to enrol.

Secondly, the most striking feature of the programme compared to virtually all the graduate programmes in Comparative Politics that I am familiar with is the absence of a substantive core course. Unlike most other universities, the compulsory core courses (SAMPOL 304 and 305) are methodological rather than substantive. While substantive core courses tend to vary somewhat across universities, most of them share the common goal of introducing the students to the core theoretical approaches and some of the main empirical areas studied by comparative political scientists. It may of course be argued that graduates of high quality undergraduate programmes are often familiar with some of this material or that the emphasis on original research at Bergen makes it more important to provide core courses in methods. Nevertheless, an advanced survey of the field may also be useful to students and help them both to choose their dissertation topics and to situate their emerging research vis-à-vis general debates in the field. It should be noted that department is planning to introduce a new field seminar in comparative politics, which is likely to address this particular point.

Thirdly, there is much less emphasis on qualitative than on quantitative methods in the programme. Unlike for quantitative methods, there are no courses focusing exclusively on

these techniques. While the core course SAMPOL 304 does cover qualitative methods, it does so with an emphasis on research design rather than specific methods and techniques. It may well be the case that the department wishes to build primarily on its strength of provision in quantitative methods and make that the signature strength of the Master's programme, which could be entirely reasonable. However, it may be worth reflecting on whether the department also wants to promote projects drawing more heavily on sophisticated qualitative or mixed (quantitative-qualitative) methods and whether it might be possible to integrate the teaching of such strategies into the programme. It should be noted that several students in the group I spoke to expressed an interest in additional training in this area, but ultimately this is of course a matter of departmental priorities.

4. CONCLUSION

Overall I have impressed with the quality of the Master's programme at Bergen and with the enthusiasm that both academics and students display towards it. The emphasis on research projects, research design and esp. quantitative methods makes the programme stand out in comparison with many other programmes in Europe and worldwide. The level of the course offerings is high and comparable to leading programmes globally. The addition of a new substantive core course will also bring the programme more in line with leading programmes elsewhere. The documentation about assessment practices is clear and transparent.