

PROGRAMME CENSOR'S REPORT

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

Assessment period: 2010 - 2013

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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 or units and of assessment practices. This report is designed to cover the entire period of my appointment 2010-2013.

The report draws on the following material:

- written documentation about the structure of the Master's programme in Comparative Politics, incl. reading lists for individual courses and information about assessment and grade distributions provided in the course of the assessment period as well as formal evaluations of course
- meetings with the academic staff and groups of Master's students during my visits to the department on 8 October 2010 and 4 November 2013

The report is structured as follows. The first section provides a brief outline of the core features of the Master's programme in Comparative Politics, incl. an account of the key changes to the programme made during the assessment period. The second section discusses some of the distinctive features and core strengths of the programme at Bergen in comparative perspective. In the following section a number of areas that might warrant further discussion are highlighted. The final section concludes.

1. GENERAL STRUCTURE OF THE PROGRAMME AND KEY CHANGES DURING THE ASSESSMENT PERIOD

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 SAMPOL306: Master's Seminar in Comparative Politics (Masterseminar i komparativ politikk, 15 credits) and SAMPOL305: Multivariate Data Analysis (Multivariat dataanalyse, 15 credits).

Semester 2: In the second semester students are required to take one compulsory module

SAMPOL 307: Comparative Methods (Komparative metodar, 10 credits)

and to choose two 10 credit options from a list of research-led units (generally related to research in one of the three priority areas: Democracy and Development, Citizens and Representation and Challenges and Change in Advanced Democracies), which may include the following most recently offered courses:

SAMPOL311: Advanced Regression Analysis; SAMPOL 341: Citizenship and Representation (Medborgarskap och representasjon); SAMPOL316: Law, Politics and Democracy; SAMPOL 342: Law and Power: Checking the State; SAMPOL343: European Integration and Transnationalization; SAMPOL 344: The normative foundation of the welfare state.

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

The structure of the programme has been changed in three key respects during the assessment period. First, the Master's seminar in Comparative Politics (SAMPOL 306) has been introduced as a new core module. Second, the course on comparative methods (SAMPOL 307) is now a 10 rather than a 15 credit unit has been moved from the autumn to the spring of the first year, and the content and assessment has changed as well. Third, as the two research-led options are now running concurrently with SAMPOL 307, they are also 10 rather 15 credit units. It is clear that the department accords a high priority to teaching and it devotes a lot of time and attention to reflecting on the content of the Master's programme. The changes reflect the department's commendable attempts to make continuous changes to improve various aspects of an already excellent programme.

GENERAL ASSESSMENT OF THE PROGRAMME AND ITS KEY STRENGTHS

It is clear that the programme is rigorous and of a very high international quality - certainly on a par with leading programmes in Europe and North America. The programme structure is very clear and well thought out. The changes to the programme have been very successful overall, and there seems to be a consensus on this among all the students and staff members I have spoken. The core Master's seminar in Comparative Politics (SAMPOL 306) is very impressive and on a par with PhD-level seminars at many leading international institutions. The introduction of this unit addresses one of the points I raised in my January 2011 report, namely that the Comparative Politics programme did not have any core substantive courses at that time. At the beginning of the assessment period all the compulsory courses were methods

courses. The new unit provides the students with an advanced graduate level overview of key approaches, theories and topics in comparative politics. It strikes a good balance between classical contributions/foundations and recent cutting-edge debates in the field. Upon taking this course the students can genuinely claim to be familiar with the field of comparative politics. While the course is pitched at a high level and the reading load is undoubtedly heavy, all the students I spoke to felt that the hard work had definitely paid off and that the course was very useful. Now that the department has made this change, the balance between substantive and methods courses is more similar to that found in other leading institutions than it was before.

A strong emphasis on research training continues to be a distinguishing feature and major strength of the programme. The quantitative methods unit SAMPOL 305 covers multiple regression analysis and provides a very good foundation for more advanced training and applied research. Given that all the students admitted to the programme are expected to have taken statistics courses as part of their previous studies, the unit is taught at a higher level than in many other Master's programmes. The qualitative methods unit SAMPOL307 fulfils a dual role - on the one hand it surveys the core logic and methods of qualitative research, and on the other hand it enables students to prepare for their own Master's dissertation research. Students and academics seem to agree that it fits much better in the spring semester than in the first autumn semester and that students can benefit more from it after taking the first semester courses.

The fact that SAMPOL 305 and 307 account for 25 out of 60 credits in the first year and that the entire second year is made up of the Master's dissertation implies that the programme has a very strong research orientation. This emphasis is much stronger than in many leading programmes in other countries, and seen from an international perspective this constitutes a distinctive strength of the programme. The students are trained to be independent consumers and producers of research and are therefore well prepared to undertake further advanced study or to work in professions where high-level analytical and research skills are valued.

The students also praised the range of available research options and the opportunity to become familiar with the research groups. While a small number of students expressed interest in specialised topics that are not currently taught in the programme (such as game theory), the general consensus among students is that the opportunity to specialise by choosing among research options was the best part of the programme, that the range of options was very good and that this helped them prepare for their own research projects. It should be noted that the department provides an excellent range of choice, incl. options on Advanced Quantitative Methods, Citizenship and Representation, European Integration and the Welfare State, which means that a wide range of sub-fields of comparative politics are covered. It is clear that the courses are well designed with clear learning outcomes and well-crafted reading lists, which introduce the students to both classic debates and recent cutting-edge debates in the field. Some of the courses are quite flexibly defined, so their content may change substantially from year to year to reflect ongoing research in the department.

Another key strength of the programme is that the provision of optional courses is linked to existing research clusters. Not only can synergies between research and teaching promote advanced research-led teaching, this is conducive to integrating students into the general research culture of the department, another issue praised by students in the programme. In terms of course content, the units maintain a very high standard in both theoretical and empirical terms. The level of teaching and coverage is appropriate for a Master's programme in Comparative Politics.

While there are a variety of assessment methods (term papers, essays or exams) for the individual units, the evidence from both detailed documentation provided by the department and conversations with students and academics suggests that the assessment practices are transparent, clear and appropriate to the learning objectives of the courses in question.

3. AREAS FOR DISCUSSION

This section highlights a couple of issues related to comments made in discussions at the department, which might merit further reflection.

First, while the department has a nice range of research-led options, there are no standardised pathways. As noted above, even the content of some of the units (defined in relation to specific research groups) may vary considerably from year to year. My sense is that this is not necessarily a problem, esp. in a programme with great strengths in research training. There is a strong case for offering generic training in comparative politics, and this does not require any commitment to specific options. Given that there is now a core Master's seminar in comparative politics, students have the opportunity to become acquainted with the field as a whole at an early stage of the programme, so there is no reason to be concerned with any lack of breadth in the course offerings, even if some options are not running in a given year. Nevertheless, some students may be attracted to Master's programmes in comparative politics because of certain substantive interests, and it might be worth considering whether there might be any advantages associated with more formalised pathways associated with more standardised options. However, the advantages of such pathways may also need to be weighed off against the benefits of offering research-led units that are flexible and up-to-date in terms of content and of offering the students the possibility of creatively combining a range of options to fit their own interests, which could speak in favour of the current arrangements.

Secondly, an issue raised by both academics and students related to the organisation of the second semester. While everyone seemed broadly happy with the content of the academic provision, a number of people have highlighted the timetabling of teaching and assessments as well as assessment practices as areas where some changes might be explored. While some issues might be addressed by offering the students more guidance about expectation, a proposal made by several students was to explore the possibility of sequencing the teaching in different ways - possibly running SAMPOL307 as a more intense module with an early assessment deadline before the optional courses begin. This would enable students to focus on the core methodological material and to prepare an assignment on methodology before

starting the other courses and working on the research design for their own projects. This might ensure a more balanced workload throughout the spring, with fewer assessment deadlines at the very end.

4. CONCLUSION

In summary, I continue to be very impressed with the Master's programme of the Department of Comparative Politics at the University of Bergen. A variety of important changes (notably the introduction of a new Master's seminar and reorganisation of core comparative methods unit) have been introduced during the assessment period. I share the view expressed by both students and academics in the department that these changes have further strengthened what was already an excellent programme. It should be noted that these changes address the key points raised in my previous report about areas that received less attention in the Master's programme in Bergen than in comparable programmes elsewhere in the world. They have allowed the programme to maintain its distinctive and considerable strengths in terms of research training, but they have also enabled students to gain a more well-rounded training in comparative politics and to see how their own research projects fit into the discipline as a whole.

It is clear that the students at Bergen get a first-rate education in comparative politics. The intellectual content and the teaching are of an excellent standard, and it is gratifying to see the enthusiasm that both academics and students display when speaking about the programme. The University of Bergen should be very pleased to offer such a terrific programme, which is of a very high calibre, comparable to the very best programmes in Europe and elsewhere in the world.