

# MASTER'S PROGRAMME IN COMPARATIVE POLITICS, FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN

PROGRAMME CENSOR'S REPORT, JANUARY 2015 (Assessment  
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## INTRODUCTION

This report addresses three issues pertaining to the marking of Master's theses in the Department of Comparative Politics that I was asked to focus on in this year's report.

1. Assess the marking of Master's theses over time, refer to previous studies. Compare with Oslo and NTNU.
2. Assess a few selected theses in light of the mark given and against the backdrop of the UHR criteria
3. Assess the overall level of achievement and quality of Master's theses compared to other countries that the programme censor is familiar with, such as Britain.

In addition to marking guidelines and official reports, it draws on three sources of material:

- (i) quantitative data and statistics about student achievement and thesis marks in Bergen and at other institutions over recent years
- (ii) close reading of six Master's theses submitted to the Department of Comparative Politics in recent years
- (iii) information gleaned during my visit to the Department of Comparative Politics on 3 December 2014, which included meetings with a variety of academic and administrative staff members

The report contains two main parts - in part A I analyse some quantitative data, notably the distribution of thesis marks at Bergen over a nine-year period as well as similar data from two comparable Norwegian institutions (UiO and NTNU). In part B I make a qualitative assessment of marking practices drawing on close reading of six theses, where I relate the levels of student achievement to national marking guidelines as well as my sense of student achievement at other international institutions.

## PART A: QUANTITATIVE ASSESSMENT

### A1. Thesis marking over time

As Table 1 illustrates, the distribution of thesis marks shows some variation over time. While the B is the most common mark in most years, A is the most common mark in 2014, and C is the most common mark in 2013, and in 2006 both A's and B's were given to 40% of the theses submitted that year. Similarly, the highest mark of A was given to 40% of the theses submitted in 2014 and 2006,

whereas only 9.1% of these were given an A in 2012. The share of C's also varies between 6.7% in 2014 to 39.3% in 2013. In some years no D's, E's or F's were given - in fact, in the entire 9 year period only one thesis was given an F (in 2009) and only two theses received E's (in 2011 and 2009). D's were given every year except for 2007, but only to 1-3 theses (though this amounted to highly variable percentage shares - ranging from 2.6 to 20% of the theses submitted and marked in a given year.)

I have also computed an average mark for each year using the same method as my predecessor Professor Bjørn Erik Rasch in his 2005 report (the formula being A=5, B=4, C=3, D=2, E=1, F=0). Professor Rasch found that the average thesis mark in 2005 was 4.05 - in his 2005 report he stressed that this was a very high mark. Although the average mark increased further to 4.15 in 2006, it has since come down considerably, though there is also some variation across cohorts of students. Since 2007 the average mark has fluctuated between 3.45 (in 2012) and 3.97 (in 2008). Both the average and the share of A's were comparatively high in 2014.

Table 1: Distribution of thesis marks (Sampol 350) for Master's theses in the Department of Comparative Politics, UiB (percentage shares listed in brackets)<sup>1</sup>

Sampol 350	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010	2009	2008	2007	2006
A	6 (40)	6 (21.4)	2 (9.1)	6 (24)	6 (30)	5 (20)	10 (25.6)	5 (17.2)	8 (40)
B	5 (33.3)	9 (32.1)	9 (40.9)	14 (56)	7 (35)	11 (44)	19 (48.7)	14 (48.3)	8(40)
C	1 (6.7)	11 (39.3)	8 (36.4)	3 (12)	5 (25)	6 (24)	9 (23.1)	10 (34.5)	3 (15)
D	3 (20)	2 (7.1)	3 (13.6)	1(4)	2 (10)	1 (4)	1 (2.6)	0	1 (5)
E	0	0	0	1 (4)	0	1 (4)	0	0	0
F	0	0	0	0	0	1 (4)	0	0	0
Total	15	28	22	25	20	25	39	29	20
Average	3.93	3.67	3.45	3.92	3.75	3.6	3.97	3.83	4.15

Although some of these percentages and averages seem to vary across cohorts and years, this should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence of inconsistencies in marking. As the final line of the table illustrates, student numbers fluctuate considerably over this time period. Student numbers are also quite small compared to some of the key reference institutions. The Oslo programme is generally at least twice as large - in some years more than 4 times larger than the Bergen programme - for example, in 2012 102 theses were submitted in Oslo, while only 22 theses were submitted in Bergen . Therefore it would be unwise to read too much into individual data points at Bergen, as idiosyncratic factors and random variation are likely to have bigger repercussions on percentages in smaller programmes.

However, it is worth noting that the two years with the highest shares of A's in the Bergen programme are also two of the years with the smallest student intakes. This might potentially suggest that smaller student numbers offered more opportunities for the students to benefit from small group teaching and even more attention from the academics than they might have had in a year with a larger cohort. However, it is equally possible that these numbers simply reflect random variation in the student intake (e.g., over-representation of highly motivated students in a given year as a result of the small cohort). What is perhaps most important is that there is no uniform time trend - in other words it does

<sup>1</sup> Please note that the total percentage share may not always add up precisely to 100 due to rounding.

not seem to the case that the marking of the best theses has become systematically stricter or more lenient over time. To the extent that there occurs some mean reversion over time, one may be more confident that the outliers are indeed caused by idiosyncratic factors and not by systematic drift.

It is also important to stress that some variation from one year to the next is to be expected, given that marking is based on qualitative level descriptors for each mark (specific criteria that have to be satisfied) and not based on a curve (mandating a fixed distribution of marks for each course). In my opinion the fluctuations are not big enough to raise any serious concerns, and qualitative criteria, such as those specified by UHR, are preferable to a curve or a fixed distribution, esp. in the case of the Comparative Politics programme at Bergen. Given that student numbers are not greater than this, it would be unrealistic and potentially unfair to the students to expect the distribution of marks to be the same every year. Although the small number of appeals suggests that confidence in the marks awarded by the Department is high, it may be worth routinely offering some (perhaps written) feedback on each thesis as a way of explicitly signalling and confirming the fairness and transparency of the marking practices. This could also pre-empt any questions about fluctuations in the marking distribution.

#### A.2 Marking patterns - comparisons with other institutions

As a comparison of Tables 1 and 2 highlights, there are many similarities between Oslo and Bergen, notably the concentration of marks in the A-C band and the small share of low marks (D-F). In his 2005 programme censor report Professor Rasch suggested that the average mark at Bergen was exceptionally high and referred to an official statement made by a group of Norwegian who had suggested that the average mark nationwide should be a C. It should be noted that the average mark at Bergen was much higher than at UiO in 2006, i.e. at the beginning of the period considered here. In 2006 the average thesis mark in the Bergen Master's programme in Comparative Politics was 4.15 compared to just 3.69 in Oslo. This is a very big difference, which amounts to almost half a mark on the average thesis. However, it should be noted that the average mark at NTNU was even higher in 2006 - 4.25 (see Table 3). In recent years the differences have been much less pronounced. The average marks do not differ greatly between Oslo and Bergen, and in fact the average mark in Oslo was actually higher in both 2012 and 2013. At NTNU the average mark has been very similar as well, i.e. generally just below 4 for the 45 sp theses (marks for the 30 sp theses are typically a bit lower on average), so it may be concluded that many of the general marking patterns have been very similar across these institutions in recent years. If there is indeed a national norm that the average mark should be a C, as Professor Rasch suggested in his 2005 report, then Bergen is certainly not an outlier: Oslo and NTNU are equally far removed from it. If anything, on average the three universities are remarkably similar in terms of average thesis marks. This is perhaps unsurprising if one considers the fact that there is always an external marker from another university, which may at least contribute to shared expectations and similar marking standards.

However, there are some interesting differences in student achievement on Master's theses in Bergen and Oslo. Most notably, the percentage share of A-marks seems to vary a lot more over time in Bergen than in Oslo. Since 2009 this share has hovered around 20% in Oslo (falling no more than a couple of percentage points above or below). Prior to 2009, the percentage share of A's was a bit lower in Oslo, though there was also a clear upward trajectory in the share of A's during the period 2006-9. By contrast, in Bergen the corresponding percentage share has varied between 9.1% and 40%, though in almost half of the years for which statistics are available the percentage shares have fallen into a similarly narrow band centred around 20%, just as in Oslo.

Table2: Marking distribution for 30sp Master's theses at UiO, percentage shares in brackets

STV4990	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010	2009	2008	2007	2006
A	12 (17.9)	18 (22.8)	23 (22.5)	15 (20)	15 (17.4)	16 (18.2)	12 (16.7)	11 (14.1)	5 (12.8)
B	33 (49.3)	36 (45.6)	48 (47.1)	38 (50.7)	43 (50)	33 (37.5)	34 (47.2)	29 (37.2)	18 (46.2)
C	20 (29.9)	23 (29.1)	27 (26.5)	18 (24)	22 (25.6)	33 (37.5)	24 (33.3)	34 (43.6)	15 (38.5)
D	1 (1.5)	2 (2.5)	2 (2.0)	3 (4)	6 (7.0)	6 (6.8)	1 (1.4)	4 (5.1)	1 (2.6)
E	1 (1.5)	0	2 (2.0)	0	0	0	1 (1.4)	0	0
F	0	0	0	1 (1.3)	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	67	79	102	75	86	88	72	78	39
Average	3.8	3.89	3.86	3.83	3.78	3.67	3.76	3.6	3.69

However, it is unclear how much should be read into the differences between Bergen and Oslo. Given that the marking is based on absolute criteria, notably nationally agreed level descriptors (UHR criteria) specifying the achievement expected for each mark, rather than a fixed distribution, one should not necessarily expect the share of A's to be identical from one year to the next or indeed across institutions. Fairly small year-on-year differences in the student intake, say one or two exceptional students, may generate big differences in the marking distribution. As discussed above, the main reason for the higher variation in the share of A's at Bergen may well be that student numbers are considerably smaller. Therefore idiosyncratic factors are likely to have a much bigger effect than in Oslo, where the larger size of the programme makes it more likely that the distributions will be similar across years.

Further circumstantial evidence in support of this conjecture is provided by the data from NTNU (cf. Table 3). Like Bergen, NTNU has much smaller student cohorts than Oslo. And again we see that the share of A's on the 45 sp theses varies from 9.5% to 41.7%. It should be noted that these numbers are strikingly similar to those at Bergen. These figures suggest that such year-on-year variation may not be unusual for Master's programmes like the one offered by the Comparative Politics department at Bergen (and at NTNU).

Table 3: Marking distribution for 45sp Master's theses at NTNU, percentage shares in brackets

POL3900	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010	2009	2008	2007	2006
A	2 (9.5)	7 (21.2)	5 (23.8)	3 (30)	6 (27.3)	4 (20)	4 (40)	5 (27.8)	5 (41.7)
B	9 (42.9)	16 (48.5)	8 (38.1)	5 (50)	8 (36.4)	12 (60)	4 (40)	9 (50)	5 (41.7)
C	9 (42.9)	9 (27.3)	6 (28.6)	2 (20)	7 (31.8)	3 (15)	1 (10)	4 (22.2)	2 (16.7)
D	1 (4.8)	1 (3.0)	0	0	1 (4.5)	1 (5)	1 (10)	0	0
E	0	0	2 (9.5)	0	0	0	0	0	0
F	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	21	33	21	10	22	20	10	18	12
Average	3.57	3.88	3.67	4.1	3.86	3.95	4.0	4.06	4.25

Table 4: marking distribution for 30sp Master's theses at NTNU

POL3901	2014	2013	2012*	2011	2010	2009	2008*	2007	2006
A	1 (9.1)	0		2 (16.7)	1 (20)	1 (12.5)		1 (16.7)	2 (20)
B	7 (63.6)	5 (83.3)		3 (25)	3 (60)	4 (50)		2 (33.3)	6 (60)
C	2 (18.2)	1 (16.7)		3 (25)	0	3 (37.5)		1 (16.7)	1 (10)
D	1 (9.1)	0		4 (33.3)	0	0		2 (33.3)	1 (10)
E	0	0		0	1 (20)	0		0	0
F	0	0		0	0	0		0	0
TOTAL	11	6		12	5	8		6	10
Average	3.72	3.83		3.25	3.6	3.75		3.33	3.9

Another difference worth stressing in this context is that the Bergen theses are 60sp projects, whereas the Oslo theses are only 30sp. Such differences also make it harder to compare student achievement in Oslo and Bergen, as the theses are not straightforwardly comparable.

Since Bergen students are expected to spend twice as long on the project, one would expect Bergen theses to be of a considerably higher quality, other things being equal, than Oslo theses. As the markers' expectations may also be correspondingly higher, it is unclear whether this has any effect on marks. The data from NTNU show that student achievement on the 45sp theses tends to be better than on the 30sp theses (this may also be due to selection effects).

More generally, students may become more interested and be more motivated if they are working on a bigger project that this is genuinely theirs (based on statistics from other universities that I am familiar with student achievement on undergraduate or Master's theses tends to be considerably higher than on taught courses).

However, based on the quantitative data one may conclude that marking practices do not significantly differ across UiB, UiO and NTNU. It seems likely that year-on-year differences reflect a range of idiosyncratic factors as well as variation in the student intake between years.

## PART B QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT

### B.1 Marking patterns - qualitative assessment: national indicators

As part of the qualitative assessment of thesis marking at Bergen I have considered a sample of six Master's theses - two from 2014 (one A and one B) and one each from 2008, 2009, 2011 and 2013 (all of which were awarded B's). In the process of reading them I have also referred to the national standards and level descriptors for different marks (UHR criteria), as well as the more detailed guidance in the 'Nasjonale retningslinjer for bedømmelse av masteroppgaver i statsvitenskap' compiled by the Nasjonalt fagråd i statsvitenskap .

As I have not had access to the feedback or the markers' reports about these individual theses, I do not know how exactly they have reasoned or justified the marks. However, I see no reason to disagree with their academic judgment, as all of the marks could certainly be justified with reference to the UHR criteria, which seem to have been applied consistently. I believe all of the B's have a variety of characteristics that are well captured by the national guidelines and criteria associated with the B range (*meget god*) . In each of these cases there is evidence of very good student achievement, though there are some limitations preventing these pieces of work from being unequivocally considered excellent or outstanding (*framragende*). The thesis that gained an A, by contrast, is clearly an outstanding piece of student research, which does meet the standards of work that can be described as

'framragende'. In short, I am confident that the national guidelines have been applied fairly, and systematically in all of these six cases.

## B.2. Marking patterns - qualitative assessment: general reflections and international perspectives

As I have already noted in my earlier reports, the Master's programme at Bergen is of very high quality by international standards. The high quality of the student intake and of the teaching in the Department of Comparative Politics is reflected in student achievement on Master's theses. As the thesis accounts for 60sp and the students effectively spend about a year working on this project, one should expect the theses to be very substantial pieces of work - indeed the heavy emphasis on student research is one of the most distinctive features and key strengths of the Bergen Comparative Politics Master's programme. Many Master's programmes elsewhere in Europe and North America devote much less weight to the thesis component, and the theses are correspondingly often shorter and less reliant on original research.

All of the theses I have read demonstrate that the students have benefited immensely from their studies at Bergen. The theses addressed an impressive range of topics ranging from presidential politics in the USA, to the role of China in Africa, post-communist corruption and other issues. Each of them is based on a clear research design and engages with substantive and methodological debates. The theses - notably the one awarded an A, but the others too - demonstrate a high degree of methodological sophistication and creative use of empirical data, which is a distinguishing feature of leading Master's programmes elsewhere in Europe and America. The students apply many different research methods - both quantitative and qualitative - in their projects, and it is gratifying to see that the breadth of the field of comparative politics is reflected in the substantive and theoretical issues covered and also in the methodological strategies that Bergen students engage with. It is clear that these theses would have been awarded high marks at leading European and American universities.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, this evaluation confirms that the quality of student research in the Master's programme in Comparative Politics at the University of Bergen is very high. I have been impressed with the quality of student research, which compares favourably with many leading programmes elsewhere in Europe or North America. It is clear that Bergen has an excellent Master's programme in Comparative Politics and that students acquire very good research skills and apply them in their thesis research. Based on this quantitative and qualitative review of marking practices at Bergen I am confident that markers follow the national marking guidelines and that the marks are fair and reflect consistent and rigorous application of these national criteria. While many of the characteristics of the marking distribution are very similar to other Norwegian institutions - notably the small numbers of low marks (D and below) and heavy concentration of marks in the A-C range (which generate similar average marks), the variation esp. in the percentage share of A's does seem to vary a bit more from year to year than e.g. in Oslo. However, this variation is not very different to the patterns observed in other Norwegian programmes, like NTNU, and it may be a function of the smaller size of these programmes. While I do not have any major concerns about these figures, it is probably advisable to examine the marking distribution and specific fluctuations from time to time. In summary, I have no reason to question the marking and assessment practices of the Master's programme in Comparative Politics at the University of Bergen, which strike me as fair and consistent with national guidelines as well as both national and international practice.