

AUDIT REPORT

ON

Master of Philosophy in Public Administration (MPA)

**Department of Administration and Organization Theory
University of Bergen
Norway**

BY

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BACKGROUND

In terms of research and teaching in Public Administration, the Department of Administration and Organization Theory at the University of Bergen has an international reputation. In addition to the undergraduate and Masters' programmes, the Department also offers PhD degrees in the areas of Public Administration. Nationally the Department has a long tradition of hosting a number of large research and other academic projects which also includes a project by the Norwegian Programme for Capacity Development in Higher Education and Research for Development (NORHED) of the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad). Internationally the Department has long standing academic partnerships with a number of leading universities in OECD and developing countries. The Department also hosts a number of leading academics in the multi-disciplinary areas of public affairs and administration.

The degree in Master of Philosophy in Public Administration (MPA) at the Department of Administration and Organization Theory at the University of Bergen dates back to 1994. The four semester (i.e. two year) long MPA programme is offered entirely in English and is a parallel academic programme to the standard Norwegian Masters degree in Public Administration. Most of the degree participants are international students with a concentration from Africa and Asia. Over the years approximately 20

students were sponsored each academic year by the scholarships by Norad and by the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund. Due to Norad's discontinuation of their scholarships scheme, in recent years some 10+ students are attending the MPA programme with the support from the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund along with a few self-financing and international exchange students.

The current report is the first out of four audit reports and covers the academic activities of the MPA programme in 2014. The three subsequent reports shall cover similar activities and development of the programme from 2015 to 2017. The report aims to present the evaluation and assessment of the MPA programme in terms of Programme and Curriculum Development; Standard of Assessments and Examinations; Students' Perspectives and Evaluation; Provision for Improvement; and some other remarks for possible consideration.

PROGRAMME AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

I had a chance to go through the MPA programme guide (i.e. handbook), course descriptions including their learning outcomes, and the assessment criteria for the courses. I have received the relevant information on time which helped me to carry out my duty as programme auditor. I also had possibilities for discussion with the programme team regarding the programme and curriculum development of the MPA programme.

The array of graduate and postgraduate course units offered in the areas of Public Administration by the Department of Administration and Organization Theory is wide ranging and offer specialism in the areas of Organization Theory, Politics and Administration, State and Governance in Developing Countries, Research Methodology, Administrative Reforms, and other areas of public and international development affairs. The MPA programme offers courses which are consistent with the scope of the degree programme and relevant to their areas of specialisation. Overall coherency of the MPA programme and its constituent courses and their learning outcomes align with relevant Masters level descriptors specified by the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education – NOKUT. In terms of the specified levels of knowledge, skills and general competence, the MPA programme meets the standard of "Level 7: Master (2. Cycle)" set by the Norwegian Qualifications Framework (NQF). In accordance with the descriptors of NOKUT/ NQF, successful completion of these modules enables students to demonstrate e.g.: 'advanced knowledge within the academic field and specialized insight in a limited area; ability to analyze and deal critically with various sources of information and use them to structure and formulate scholarly arguments; and ability to analyze relevant academic, professional and research ethical problems (see e.g. NOKUT 2015 - <http://www.nokut.no/en/> for more details)'.

Observation and suggestions for improvement: It is noted that the Master of Philosophy in Public Administration (MPA) is a research-intensive MPhil programme and the emphasis is more on academic research rather than on traditional coursework. The research-intensive nature of the MPhil programme is praiseworthy. However having observed the programme documentation it is suggested that the current programme handbook (entitled '*A master's students guide to master of philosophy in public administration*') requires a major revision. To further guide the current and future students the following programme documents should be revised and developed: i.) a detailed programme handbook ii.) a

complete dissertation handbook and iii.) updated reading lists for the course units. As agreed with the programme team, I have provided them a few samples to look at and design their own programme and dissertation handbooks.

Based on my experience of external examinations and audits of Postgraduate programmes in UK universities and based on my personal observation on the MPA programme at Bergen, I feel the Department needs to create and sustain a more vibrant and active academic environment for the MPhil programme with increased engagement of dedicated staff and students.

The MPA programme is an important and integral part of the internalisation process of the Department and the University of Bergen. Therefore the programme should have all the necessary resources and logistic supports available to further develop, sustain and achieve its strategic objectives. The University of Bergen and the Department may want to consider creating an additional 'ring-fenced' budget dedicated to the MPA programme.

STANDARD OF ASSESSMENTS AND EXAMINATIONS

I have received a number of assignment questions, guidelines and copies of Master's Thesis. I had the possibility to look at the students' results and performance. During my audit visit to Bergen I also had the possibility to discuss with the programme team and with the current and ex-students regarding assessments and examinations of the MPA programme.

The offered assessment method is wide ranging and there is a perfect balance between unseen written papers, assignments and Master's Thesis. Overall assessments of course units were not excessively loaded which could have burdened the students. At the same time, in terms of methods of assessments, no courses were over or under-assessed. The length of the assignments and methods of assessment were appropriate at Postgraduate level and logically set.

The grading criteria regarding various scales i.e. Best: A, Pass: E, Failure: F, etc. levels are transparent and clearly specified. The grading criteria also maintained the standard in setting up the assessment process at Postgraduate level. Students are provided opportunities to select questions from a set of alternative questions and the nature, spread and level of the examination questions meets the standard of Masters level.

Observation and suggestions for improvement: I did not find any inconsistencies with the design and structure of the assessment and the assessment method. Having observed the assessment practice, I can confirm that an appropriate level of academic standard is being maintained in the above programmes and programme-related modules.

STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES AND EVALUATION

During my audit visit at the University of Bergen I had the possibility to discuss with the programme team and with a good number of current and ex-students regarding their perception and experience of

the MPA programme. I also have observed and interacted with a good number of ex-students who completed their degrees in the past. In addition, I had the possibility of going through students' evaluation and various comments students' made on the MPA programme.

Having interacted with a good number of current and ex-students, I feel that an appropriate level of academic standard is being maintained in the MPA programme and its programme-related course units at the Department of Administration and Organization Theory. The overall achievements towards MPhil awards which I have observed suggest that the Department has been very effective in providing and ensuring high standard teaching and learning to ensure an appropriate level of progression for its students. More importantly there is clear evidence that over the years a large number of ex-students who completed their MPA degrees moved on with their career and/or further studies (i.e. PhD) and established them in their professional life at various parts of the world.

However during my meeting with students I found the first semester students are still trying to integrate into the programme and trying to get used to the lifestyle in Norway. At the same time I found most of the matured (i.e. second, third and final semester) students are more integrated into the programme and enjoying their studies. In my opinion the issue is related to the 'diverse academic backgrounds' the students come from and the ways they 'manage their expectation'. Many of the new students requested for more guidance from the programme team and from the Department. There is a strong suggestion from almost all the current students I have met during my October 2014 trip to Bergen to 'bring the Norwegian and international students together'.

Overall student evaluation of the course units is generally positive and as part of the standard academic process I believe each course teacher/s would deal with the comments made by the students.

Observation and suggestions for improvement: The new students find it difficult to get integrated into the MPA programme. In order to address this issue the programme team/Department may want to design and develop a standard 'induction week'/'welcome-week' programme with comprehensive information where all the new students could physically participate and spend time with the programme team and get necessary advice from the academic and administrative staff. The Department may want to make a provision that one of the required single module could be attended by all the Norwegian and international students together. All students should have regular access to/contact with their 'personal tutors' if possible. As suggested earlier a more 'comprehensive and detailed programme handbook' and 'a complete dissertation handbook' shall be helpful to plan and manage the expectation of the students.

Additional tutorial classes during the first semester should be provided to help the new students who come from different academic backgrounds. These tutorial sessions would make them acquainted with the course curriculum and would also be helpful to overcome the challenges they face at the beginning of their programme of study.

The Master Student Committee and the Social Events Committee of the Department should be more active to engage new international students with their activities and may organise more social events especially during the autumn semester. The programme team/Department may want to explore more possible options to bring the Norwegian and international students together.

PROVISION FOR IMPROVEMENT

Contexts of Public Administration have changed significantly over the recent decades. Thematic areas of the diverse courses offered at the MPA programmes are unique and contemporary to present day public and international development affairs. This is undeniably true in the case of MPA programme offered and how it relates with the emerging thematic areas of development management and public administration. The effective and formative assessment processes and how these are integrated in the MPA programme are praiseworthy. Also the multidisciplinary teaching orientation by programme team is commendable. In addition to the suggestions above, the following points should be considered by the programme team and the Department:

Concerns from the audit visit

Student numbers: Due to the discontinuation of Norad's scholarship scheme, student numbers onto the MPA programme has significantly dropped in recent years. In order to keep the programme academically viable, the Department should increase the number of students to 20. In case of scarcity of scholarships, the Department should try to attract self-financing international students. Obviously the increase in number of students would also require more active engagement of the Department staff in terms of teaching and supervision. Therefore the Department may want to incentivise the contributing staff members and factor in their additional contribution into the MPA programme in their personal workload and input-recognition as part of the reward strategy.

Academic staff retirement: Professor Steinar Askvik is one of the two coordinators of the MPA programme. Over the decades he has been very instrumental and played a key role to design, develop and run the programme with Professor Ishtiaq Jamil. Professor Askvik is due to retire in two years time which poses a real threat to the programme. It is advisable that the Department should plan in advance and look for his replacement as soon as possible – as the new academic staff would require a year or two to fully integrate with the programme team and the Department. The prospective replacement should have the necessary qualifications required – and especially must have profound understanding in the theory and practice of various thematic areas of international development management and public administration as this relates to developing countries.

Programme webpage updates: Overall programme documentations including web info of the MPA programmes should be revised and updated as soon as possible. This would especially be required if the Department would try to attract more self-financing and international exchange students to the programme.

Student attendance: There were also concerns regarding the attendance of students in the class. This is a serious issue – as the absence of students has a direct impact on the teaching and learning activities of the programme. It is strongly advisable that the course teachers start to use a 'list of attendance' in their classes. It is also important that the MPhil students join and actively take part in the activities of various research groups of the Department.

Final Remarks

As stated earlier, an appropriate level of academic standard is being maintained in the MPA programmes and programme-related course units. The overall achievements towards MPhil awards which I have observed suggest that the programme team has been very effective in providing and ensuring high standard teaching and learning to ensure an appropriate level of progression for its students.

Finally I would like to confirm that all the meetings with staff and students during my October 2014 trip to the University of Bergen was very effective. Meetings with the programme team and the Department staff conducted in a professional, systematic and collegial manner. I was provided opportunities to express my views, raise questions and make comments and suggestions where appropriate. I also found the programme administration very sincere and effective in carrying out their responsibilities (i.e. in making paper works available on time, presentation of various items, organisational assistance, etc.) with a high degree of professionalism. I look forward to our future cooperation.
