

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

PROGRAMME CENSOR'S REPORT, JANUARY 2016 (Assessment period: Spring-Autumn 2015)

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INTRODUCTION

This report addresses the following questions pertaining to the Master's programme in the Department of Comparative Politics that I was asked to focus on in this year's report:

Vurdere ulike sider ved strukturen i mastergraden og til en viss grad innholdet i obligatoriske emner i som inngår i graden. De tre punktene må vurderes hver for seg, men må nødvendigvis også vurderes i sammenheng:

- 1. Vurdere innholdet og vektingen (SP) av de to obligatoriske metodeemnene på mastergraden: SAMPOL305 Multivariat dataanalyse (15SP) og SAMPOL307 Komparative metoder (10SP).*
- 2. Vurdere strukturen i de obligatoriske og valgfrie kursene på mastergraden.*
- 3. Vurdere hvorvidt det er grunnlag eller behov for å videreføre en 60 SP masteroppgave. Og dersom det er grunnlag for det, gjerne å foreslå konkrete endringer.*

Vi tror også det kan være nyttig med et lite nasjonalt eller internasjonalt komparativt element i denne bestillingen, og det er selvfølgelig åpent for å gjøre det.

The report draws on official programme documentation, module handbooks and reading lists provided by the Department of Comparative Politics. It is also informed by my own experience of teaching in three different countries, which provides a comparative perspective, as well my visits to the Department of Comparative Politics in previous years. During my visits I had the opportunity to meet with a variety of academic and administrative staff members to discuss the structure and content of the programme.

The report contains four parts - I begin with some general observations, and in the second and third sections I discuss the core methods courses and the balance between core and optional courses respectively. In the fourth section I discuss the Master's thesis (*masteroppgave*).

1. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THE MASTER'S PROGRAMME

The structure of the Master's programme in Comparative Politics at Bergen is distinctive and well thought out. Compared to other programmes in this field, both in Norway and other countries, the most distinctive feature of the programme is the emphasis on research.

This is reflected in the overall structure of the programme, notably in the high weighting of the thesis and the fact that students devote the entire second year of the programme to it. It is also reflected in the core courses and in the emphasis on methodological content. It is obvious that the teaching offered at the Department of Comparative Politics at the University of Bergen is excellent both in terms of its quality and range.

The department is to be congratulated for offering a first-rate Master's level education in comparative politics of a very high international quality.

2. METHODS COURSES

This section focuses on the two compulsory methods courses in the programme, namely SAMPOL 305 (15 credits) and SAMPOL307 (10 credits). The emphasis on core methods courses demonstrates the research focus of the programme - this is a key difference compared to many programmes elsewhere. In the programmes with which I am familiar, most of the core courses tend to have a substantive focus, and typically at the most a third or a quarter of the core courses relate to methods. In Bergen almost half of them - 25 out of 40 credits of core courses - relate to Methods training. And for students choosing a methodologically oriented option, such as advanced regression analysis (SAMPOL332 *Vidaregåande regresjonsanalyse*), methods could account 35 out of 60 credits taken in the first year of the programme.

The content of both of the two core methods courses is very good. Much of this is standard material that can be found in similar courses at other leading universities, but it is covered very well and at a relatively advanced level. SAMPOL305 is a course on multivariate data analysis and covers the basics of statistical inference and the workhorse OLS model, but also binary response models and analysis of panel data or time-series-cross-sectional data. It is also worth noting that it covers multi-level modelling, which is often considered as a more advanced topic. Given the importance of multi-level modelling to current research in political science, it is good to see that this is covered in a core Master's level course. At many other universities this might only be covered in an advanced optional course. The relatively advanced level of this course provides further evidence of the high quality of the programme and of the student intake, which means that some quantitative skills can be taken as a prerequisite. This is not always the case, even in leading Master's programmes in Britain or the United States.

SAMPOL307 is a very comprehensive course covering a wide array of topics related to research design in comparative politics. Unlike many other courses on comparative methods

at the Master's level, this course is primarily based on advanced scholarly articles rather than a textbook. The most important topics in comparative methodology are covered, including the comparative method, strategies of qualitative research, data collection, case studies, multi-method research and research ethics. In addition to these topics the course also contains discussion of how to construct a research proposal, which helps students get a head start on their Master's theses.

At first sight it seems slightly surprising that it this is a 10 credit course - in light of the range of topics and given the fact that there are two forms of assessment (an exam and a research proposal). In this sense the course looks comparable to SAMPOL 305, which is a 15 credit course. There may of course be various justifications for this - perhaps the workload of SAMPOL 305 may be more time-consuming from the students' perspective, given that there is a strong emphasis on skills acquisition and practical exercises.

Another justification may be that the programme wants to signal a strong commitment to quantitative training. Given that there is a generic course on comparative methods (which also contains coverage on qualitative methods) and both a core and an optional course on quantitative methods, but no course focusing *exclusively* on (either core or advanced) qualitative methods, the programme places a clear emphasis on quantitative methods and approaches to comparative politics. To some extent this is in line with the growing emphasis on quantitative training in many other universities and programmes as well. While there is an increasing emphasis on quantitative methods both in research and teaching of comparative politics, it is relatively rare for the quantitative component to be quite as substantial in generalist Master's programmes in comparative politics. It should also be noted that strong quantitative skills may enhance the employability of the graduates of the programme, as they are highly regarded in many professions and careers. They also prepare students well for further academic research both as part of their Master's thesis and beyond.

3. CORE AND OPTIONAL COURSES

The relative weighting of core and optional courses is effectively 2: 1, with the three core courses accounting for 40 credits and the two options for 20 credits of the taught component of the Master's programme. This is quite a typical split - in some programmes the options may account for a smaller or larger percentage of the curriculum, but this varies quite a bit across different universities.

In addition to the two methods courses, the third core course in the relatively new course SAMPOL 306, which was introduced after I became programme censor in 2010. Based on the information I have had access to, this course seems to be very successful - this was also the view expressed by the students I spoke to during my previous visits. It should be noted that this course is quite ambitious for a Master's programme - in fact, it is perhaps more reminiscent of advanced graduate training at the PhD level in the US than of most MA/MSc programmes either in the US or Europe. But the coverage is really excellent - all key areas in comparative politics are represented on the syllabus. Students taking this course will get a

very solid foundation in comparative politics that will serve them well in their own research, not least since they will be in a position to situate their own projects in relation to foundational debates in the discipline as a whole. In that sense this core course is another feature of the programme which ensures that it is at the cutting edge of comparative politics programmes worldwide.

The optional courses vary a great deal from year to year - the spring 2016 offerings include the following:

SAMPOL332 Vidaregåande regresjonsanalyse; SAMPOL319 Democracy: Liberalism and Its Critics; SAMPOL321 Political Parties in the Post-Conflict State; SAMPOL323 Nye styringsformer i nordområda. Kva blir rolla til urfolka?; SAMPOL324 Politisk engasjement: Endringar og utfordringar; SAMPOL326 Constitution and Politics; SAMPOL327 The Politics of Gender: Citizenship, representation and development

These options cover a wide range of topics and sub-fields within comparative politics, incl. methodology, political parties, representation, constitutions, gender politics, indigenous minorities, governance and representation. Some sub-fields of comparative politics are inevitably not represented, but this list provides the students with a good range of options to choose from and it represents a cross-section of many core research areas in the field.

While this range of options differs from the lists that I have reviewed in previous years, the emphasis on research-led teaching is constant over the years. This ensures that the options remain up to date and also that they are connected to the three key research groups in the department: Democracy and Development; Citizens, Opinion, Representation; Challenges in Advanced Democracies. This is helpful for integrating students into the research community of the department.

4. MASTER'S THESIS (*MASTEROPPGAVE*)

The 60 credit Master's thesis is one of the most distinctive features of the programme. As I discussed in more detail in last year's report, the quality of the students' thesis research is impressive and high by international standards.

Virtually all the European and North American Master's programmes that I am familiar with put considerably less emphasis on the thesis component. The corresponding programme at the University of Oslo has a 30 credit thesis, and at NTNU students write either a 30 or a 45 credit thesis. At Swedish universities, the Master's thesis is generally also a 30 credit project. At most British universities the Master's thesis constitutes between a quarter and a third of the degree, so I am not aware of any other programme in which the thesis accounts for 50% of a regular Master's degree (as opposed to a few specialised Master's degrees by research). Indeed, given that the assessment for SAMPOL 307 also includes a research proposal which relates to the thesis research, one might even argue that the thesis accounts for more than 50% of the programme.

However, the fact that this is not common elsewhere should not necessarily imply that there is a case for changing the structure and weighting of the thesis at Bergen - potentially quite the contrary. It could be viewed as one of the most distinctive features of the Comparative Politics programme at the University of Bergen. The high calibre of the students and the relatively small size of the programme may facilitate such a strong research focus, which may be hard to maintain in very large programmes, as those common in many other countries.

Of course, every distinctive feature also entails trade-offs - in this case between depth/research focus and breadth/range of courses taken. The emphasis on research and on the thesis inevitably means that students take fewer courses, since they work independently on their own projects in the second year. However, given the high quality of the student intake and the strong foundational training they receive in the first year, this may of course be seen as an advantage, not least given the high quality of the theses.

Therefore there could be a strong case for retaining it, not least since it is arguably the most distinctive feature of the programme. The research focus and strong methodological training, incl. a clear emphasis on quantitative methods, are the two features that stand out most compared to other similar programmes. Other programme structures would of course be possible and might also have some advantages, e.g. by offering students a wider range of courses. However, given that the students I have spoken to over the years seem to be very satisfied with the current structure of the programme, there may well be a compelling case for harnessing and building on existing strengths, which should continue to make this excellent programme both distinctive and attractive to prospective students.