

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

PROGRAMME CENSOR'S REPORT, JANUARY 2017 (Assessment period: Spring-Autumn 2016)

PROGRAMME CENSOR: Dr Magnus Feldmann, School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, University of Bristol, UK

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:

Instituttet har i flere år tilbudt valgfrie kurs i andre semester på mastergraden. Vi ønsker en vurdering av på bredden i det valgfrie emneprogrammet, og en sammenlikning om emnene er på samme nivå med tanke på kvalitet, omfanget av pensum, krav til essay, etc

The report draws on official programme documentation, module handbooks and reading lists provided by the Department of Comparative Politics as well as information gleaned during my visit to the Department in November 2016 (as well as previous visits), when I had the opportunity to meet with students as well as academic and administrative staff in the department. It is also informed by my own experience of university systems in multiple countries.

The main goal of this report is to provide an overview and assessment of the optional modules in the Master's programme in Comparative Politics. This report seeks to demonstrate that they are an integral and successful part of this excellent programme.

The report consists of four parts - I begin with some general observations, and in the second and third sections I discuss the range of optional modules and the content of specific modules. The fourth section is a brief conclusion.

1. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE STRUCTURE AND WEIGHTING OF THE OPTIONAL MODULES IN THE MASTER'S PROGRAMME

As I have noted in earlier reports, the Master's programme in Comparative Politics at the University of Bergen is distinctive in several respects, perhaps most importantly given the emphasis on research. This means that the Master's thesis along with the compulsory modules on methodological topics account for well over half of the programme – well above the norm in many leading universities.

This is reflected in the overall structure of the programme, notably in the weighting of the thesis (60 credits), to which the students devote the entire second year of the programme. It is also reflected in the methodological content of several core requirements, which account for 25 out of 40 credits of core modules.

On top of this, students select two 10 credit options in the second semester of the first year. In recent years they have either taken them simultaneously with SAMPOL 307, or more recently, after completing the latter module. The question of whether these modules should run simultaneously or sequentially has been raised during all my visits over the past few years. When the options ran simultaneously with SAMPOL 307, the students seemed very unhappy and argued that this made time management very difficult. They tended to express a preference for taking SAMPOL 307 first. However, once this change had been introduced, student preferences seemed to change, with the majority advocating a shift back to the model where the two options and SAMPOL 307 run in parallel. The main reason for this is that they would like to have more time to reflect on the readings and content of the optional modules and not to study them in a compressed fashion. I understand that the programme is moving back to the old model again. Perhaps there is a way of staggering seminars and assessment deadlines in a way avoids any concerns about time management, while also giving the students a longer stretch of time to engage with the module.

However, apart from concerns surrounding the organisational aspects and timetabling of these modules, the students have expressed great enthusiasm about the optional modules. Several students stated that the options were the best part of the Master's programme. While a minority of students felt that their preferred area of study was not represented in the list of options, all of the students praised the ways in which the options tie in with the activities of the research centres. They also appreciated the opportunity to choose options and to specialise as part of the programme. In light of the size of the programme, the range of options is clearly very good, and the students tend to be happy to acknowledge this as well.

It should also be noted that some students have expressed a preference for expanding the optional modules from 10 to 15 credits and moving SAMPOL 307 to the second year of the programme. The students favouring this change have made two arguments. First, they argued that the optional modules are one of the highlights of the Master's programme and that it would be desirable to devote more time to them, also in order to develop an area specialisation for the Master's thesis. Second, they also suggested that there would be obvious synergies between SAMPOL307 and the Master's thesis, if this module were offered

in the second year. The students advocating this change also seemed to favour adjusting the weighting of the Master's thesis accordingly – either by folding SAMPOL into the thesis or reducing the number of credits awarded for the thesis.

While this strikes me as an interesting idea that the department may wish to reflect on, I hasten to add that I do not wish to make any specific recommendation about this. First, the heavy weighting of the Master's thesis is one of the most distinctive features of the Comparative Politics programme at Bergen, so any decision about potential changes to one of the hallmarks of the programme should not be taken lightly. Second, the number of students in attendance was too small for me to assess whether this view is representative of student preferences. Similarly, even the students suggesting this were generally satisfied with the programme as it is currently structured, so this should probably be viewed as food for thought rather than a strong endorsement of an alternative model. As both the current model and the proposed modification of it are likely to be very successful, this is ultimately a matter of priorities and of deciding which model best meets the goals of the department.

2. COMMENTS ON THE RANGE OF MODULES

As shown in Table 1, there are typically about five optional modules in any given year, from which the first year Master's students at Bergen choose two. As this table demonstrates, the specific optional modules may vary from one year to the next, but there is also considerable continuity. The range of options is in many respects quite typical of comparative politics programmes elsewhere. Considering the size of the programme, the breadth and coverage of sub-fields is excellent, though it is inevitable that some sub-fields are not represented (such as comparative political economy). Compared to some other programmes, two features stand out. First, all of the modules have a substantive focus. There are no options explicitly devoted to a particular country or region, such as modules on Latin American or East Asian politics that are offered at many other universities. This makes good sense given the size of the programme. The substantive focus enables students to apply the conceptual and substantive material to a region or country of their choice. Second, there seems to be a special emphasis on topics related to governance, representation and participation. These are obviously classic topics in comparative politics, which are of great relevance to all countries and regions of the world.

Based on the general information provided, all of these modules are comparable in terms of workload, expectations and rigour. Each of them covers a distinct area of scholarship in comparative politics (or closely related fields), and the learning outcomes are well defined. The reading lists are relevant and up-to-date, and I am confident that all of these options provide the students with an excellent training in comparative politics. Teaching arrangements and assessment procedures are very similar across modules, as essays are the main form of assessment in all cases. The maximum word count varies slightly (and in one case participation accounts for 10% of the mark), but the requirements are appropriate for this kind of programme and sufficiently similar for all the modules to be viewed as equivalent.

Table 1: Optional modules offered, 2015-17

Module code	Title	Module convenor	Spring 2017	Spring 2016	Spring 2015
SAMPOL319	Liberalism and Its Critics: Classic and Contemporary	Michael Alvarez	NO	YES	YES
SAMPOL321	Political Parties in the Post-Conflict State	Kristin Strømsnes/Jonas Linde/Elisabeth Ivarsflaten	NO	NO	YES
SAMPOL323	Nye styringsformer i nordområda. Kva blir rolla til urfolka	Per Selle	YES	YES	YES
SAMPOL324	Politisk engasjement: Endringar og utfordringar	Kristin Strømsnes	YES	YES	YES
SAMPOL326	Constitution and Politics	Siri Gloppen	NO	NO	YES
SAMPOL327	The Politics of Gender: Citizenship, Representation and Development	Ragnhild Muriaas	NO	YES	NO
SAMPOL328	Lawfare: Law as Political Strategy	Siri Gloppen	YES (NEW)	NO	NO
SAMPOL329	Political Parties in New Democracies	Lise Rakner/Lars Svåsand	YES (NEW)	NO	NO
SAMPOL332	Videregående regresjonsanalyse	Tor Midtbø	YES	YES	NO

3. COMMENTS ON SPECIFIC MODULES: CONTENT AND ASSESSMENT

This section offers some brief reflections on six optional modules that I have been able to examine more closely:

SAMPOL 332 - Videregående regresjonsanalyse

As one might expect, given the research and methods focus of the programme, there is also an optional module on advanced regression analysis. This module covers a variety of advanced topics, including multilevel modelling, and should prepare students for conducting sophisticated quantitative research. It is indicative of the high level of achievement and methodological sophistication of the students that this module seems to be very popular. The assigned readings are standard surveys of the field that would be covered at other leading universities as well.

SAMPOL327: The Politics of Gender: Citizenship, representation and development

This module offers a comprehensive overview of many issues related to the politics of gender. It contains some conceptual material anchoring the module in debates about representation in political theory as well as a range of empirical topics related to a variety of

countries ranging from Sweden to Japan and across a variety of countries in the OECD and Africa. The module is ambitious both in terms of its theoretical and empirical scope.

SAMPOL 324: Politisk engasjement

This module covers one of the most influential research agendas in comparative politics over the last 20 years, namely issues related to political participation, civic engagement as well as issues related to political disengagement and the rise of populism. The readings are a mix of canonical readings and recent contributions addressing both Scandinavian and international country cases. The option provides a very good survey of the field and key research agendas in comparative politics.

SAMPOL 323: Nye styringsformer i nordområda. Kva blir rolla til urfolka?

This is another interesting and innovative option that lies at the intersection of a number of timely debates on multiculturalism, representation, minority rights as well as the politics of the Arctic. This module is highly relevant to the Nordic political context as well and a distinctive contribution to the programme.

SAMPO321: Political Parties in the Post-Conflict State

This is a wide-ranging option that should be useful to students interested in political parties, peace-building and post-conflict politics and reconciliation. The module is innovative in bringing all of these themes together. It is also coherent and addresses very important issues in a sophisticated way.

SAMPOL 319: Liberalism and its critics

This is perhaps a slightly unusual option in a comparative politics programme given that it focuses almost exclusively on political theory, but in my view it provides a nice complement to the other options. As it highlights key theoretical debates that are relevant to applied research in comparative politics, this should help students hone their analytical skills and theoretical awareness, thereby enhancing their research skills as well.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As in previous years, I have been very impressed with the high quality of the Master's programme in Comparative Politics at the University of Bergen. This examination of the optional modules reinforces this general impression. The department offers a terrific array of research-led options that are well integrated into the activities of the research centres and research culture of the department. The reading lists are excellent and contribute to achieving the ambitious learning outcomes of the modules and the programme as a whole. It is clear that these options – along with the core modules and the independent research component – ensure that the students get an excellent training in comparative politics that is on a par with the best programmes in Europe and North America. Students develop a variety of useful transferable skills, which ensures that they are well prepared for a variety of careers and further research as well.