

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

PROGRAMME CENSOR'S REPORT, JANUARY 2018 (Assessment period: Spring 2014-Autumn 2017)

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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:

oppsummering av tidligere rapporter med en sammenfatning av inntrykkene og med anbefalinger om hva vi bør arbeide med videre

The report draws on previous programme censor reports as well as some official programme documentation, module handbooks and reading lists provided by the Department of Comparative Politics as well as information gleaned during my visits to the Department in previous years. During such visits I had the opportunity to meet with students as well as the academic and administrative staff in the department. It is also informed by my own experience of university systems in several countries. I have also reviewed some new materials from the department and the faculty about recent changes (affecting SAMPOL 307 and SAMPOL 350) and about student enrolment and retention.

The main goal of this report is to provide a general overview and assessment of the Master's programme in Comparative Politics based on the experience of the last four years, with brief references made to the previous four years when I served my first term as programme censor. This report summarises and reflects on the findings from earlier reports and discusses some implications of these issues.

The report consists of four parts - I begin with some general observations on the programme, including the core module (SAMPOL 306). The second section discusses the MA options, and the third section analyses the research component, including both methods training and the MA thesis. The fourth section is a conclusion with some recommendations.

1. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE MA IN COMPARATIVE POLITICS

This Master's programme is taught by the Department of Comparative Politics at the University of Bergen, an outstanding teaching and research community specialising in the political science sub-field of comparative politics. The academic staff is research-active and regularly publishes high quality research in leading international journals. The teaching is research-led, which ensures that the students learn from experts in the field, who familiarise their students with the latest and most relevant research. There is a first-rate research culture in the department. Students are invited to participate in the activities of one of the research groups. The department engages in systematic reflection on its teaching practices, and a variety of innovations have been introduced over the past eight years, which have made what was already an excellent programme even stronger.

The programme is medium-sized, typically with about 20-30 students graduating in a given year (between 2013-14 and 2016-17 the number of graduating students ranged between 17 and 31 per academic year). Average completion rates are above the average in the faculty, which demonstrates that students view the programme as engaging and relevant and also that appropriate support structures are in place to help students complete their studies. On the other hand, there seem to be considerable year-on-year fluctuations (ranging from 60% in 2014 to 100% in 2015). More generally, given the strategic priority attached to increasing student numbers across the Faculty, initiatives targeting student recruitment, progression and retention are likely to be key priorities in coming years.

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 its high overall quality, but also given the great emphasis that it places on student research. 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 (SAMPOL 305 and SAMPOL 307).

There is also a very ambitious core module in comparative politics (SAMPOL 306) which bears great resemblance to PhD courses at many other institutions, given its scope and comprehensiveness. This module provides an excellent and advanced overview of the field of comparative politics, including important fields of research and theoretical perspectives. The introduction of this course during my first term as programme censor is an example of the commitment to continuous improvement and refinement of the programme that is another distinguishing characteristic of the programme. In terms of further substantive training in the sub-field, the students also select two 10 credit option in the second semester of the first year.

2. OPTIONS AND SPECIALISATION

As shown in Table 1 (taken from the programme censor's report submitted in January 2017), five optional modules are typically offered each year, from which the first year Master's students in Comparative Politics choose two.

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

As this table demonstrates, the specific optional modules on offer usually vary from one year to the next, but there is also considerable continuity. Considering the size of the programme, the breadth and coverage of sub-fields is excellent. The coverage of topics related to governance, representation and participation is particularly strong, while a few other research areas are not represented (such as e.g. political regimes and democratisation or comparative political economy). These MA modules have a substantive focus. It should be noted that there are no options focusing on a particular country or region, such as Africa, Latin America, the Middle East or Eastern Europe, which are a key component of Comparative Politics programmes at many universities. However, adopting a thematic rather than a regional approach may be more in line with recent trends in the field of comparative politics, which have tended to de-emphasise area studies. A thematic approach also enables students to apply such theories and insights to the country cases or regions that they are most interested in. This makes sense given the size of the programme.

The options are well designed and provide a good overview of a research area in comparative politics (or closely related fields). The learning outcomes are clearly specified, and the assessments are appropriate. The reading lists contain a wealth of relevant material and contain some of the most recent and influential research in the field. Each module makes a distinctive contribution to the range of options and familiarises the students taking it with important debates and approaches to comparative politics.

During the years of my appointment students have repeatedly stressed that they view the options as one of their favourite parts of the programme. Indeed, some of them have felt that these options ought to be expanded from 10 to 15 credits to enable students to pursue issues of their choice in more depth. This would entail increasing the weight attached to the options in the programme. As I have noted in earlier reports, should the department wish to make any changes in this regard, the easiest way of shifting the balance might be to integrate SAMPOL 307 into the first term of the second year, as suggested by a few students during my earlier visits.

While the content of individual options is excellent, the year-on-year variation in the options on offer raises questions about the predictability and coherence of range of options. This issue has been raised repeatedly over the years, since students usually only find out about the available choices towards the end of the first semester and do not know the options before enrolling in the programme.

One way of addressing this might be to create pathways that enhance the links between the programme structure and the research themes of the department. This might entail making sure that there are at least two options available every year in a few key research areas, such as electoral and party politics, interests and representation or other core areas (possibly also including advanced methodology, such as statistical or experimental methods). Such areas could map onto the existing research groups in the department. By offering students the possibility to choose options from particular sub-fields of comparative politics, this would enable them to demonstrate that their qualifications are distinctive and enhance the substantive focus of the programme (e.g. MA in Comparative Politics, with a specialisation in Electoral Politics). While the specific options on offer might vary from one year to the next, the existence of such pathways might also enhance the predictability of the programme and alleviate student concerns that they do not know in advance which options will be on offer in a given year. This could also strengthen the emphasis on research-led teaching and also help integrate the students into the activities of specific research groups.

3. RESEARCH FOCUS: METHODS TRAINING AND THESIS

As noted above and also in earlier reports, one of the most distinctive features of the MA programme at the University of Bergen is the heavy emphasis on the research component. This research component includes both methods training and a 60 credit Master's thesis, to which the students devote the second year of the MA programme.

The methods training consists of two compulsory modules – SAMPOL 305 and SAMPOL 307. SAMPOL 305 gives the students a thorough grounding in the most important and relevant quantitative approaches to political science. While the readings and approaches covered in the module are quite typical of comparable courses elsewhere, this module is very well designed and more advanced than equivalent modules at many other universities. It is clear that students get a very good training in quantitative methods. This is particularly the case for those students who also take the MA option in advanced quantitative methods (SAMPOL 332).

SAMPOL 307 is also an excellent module – it provides a comprehensive overview of the challenges surrounding research design as well as some training in key qualitative research methods. It should be noted that there have been some changes to this module over the past year – the research proposal, which used to be a part of SAMPOL 307 has now been integrated into the MA thesis and is submitted early in the second year of the programme.

While it may be necessary to evaluate how this works in practice over the next few years, there are clearly compelling reasons for this change, which addresses a variety of concerns raised in previous years. First and foremost, it frees up more time to cover a wider range of topics in SAMPOL 307. Over the past eight years this module has evolved considerably from being mostly focused on abstract principles of research design to incorporating more practical research skills, including more detailed coverage of a variety of qualitative methods, which students have requested in the past. This is also likely to be very useful to students who use qualitative methods for their MA theses.

However, this change may also strengthen SAMPOL 350 – the MA thesis (Masteroppgåve). The research proposal provides more structure for the thesis process, by ensuring that students have more milestones as part of the actual thesis process and get systematic feedback beyond the individual supervisions. Given that the thesis accounts for 60 credits and encompasses the entire second year, there is a risk that some students may feel disconnected from the programme and the academic community. While the integration of students into the research groups and the individual contact with supervisors alleviate such concerns to a considerable extent, incorporating the prospectus into the second year may strengthen the student community and contribute to the success of the theses as well. In addition, such milestones and related seminars are also likely to boost the completion rates of the programme. This conjecture is consistent with the findings of the Faculty study ‘Studentnær oppfølging’, which provides some evidence of positive effects of compulsory seminars on completion rates. While the completion rates of the MA in Comparative Politics are quite high compared to most programmes in the Faculty, there would still be some room for improvement in this regard.

Given that the MA thesis is a central component of the programme and students devote a whole year to it, it is perhaps not surprising that the level of achievement is high. As documented in the report compiled in January 2015, the marking patterns are consistent with national trends and very similar to what can be observed at the University of Oslo or NTNU. In conjunction with the work on that report, I also had the opportunity to read a sample of

theses, and I was impressed with the quality of the research undertaken by the students in the MA programme in Comparative Politics.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout the eight years that I have had the privilege of serving as the programme censor of the MA in Comparative Politics at the University of Bergen, I have been very impressed with the high quality of this Master's programme. It has been a true pleasure to visit and learn more about the Department of Comparative Politics, the University of Bergen and the Master's programme over the past eight years. The department has greatly facilitated my work by offering detailed documentation, clear guidance about the issues of interest and also a very warm welcome during my visits to Bergen.

It is clear that this programme is excellent and very successful. The MA in Comparative Politics at the University of Bergen is a leading graduate programme that meets the highest international standards of the discipline. By way of conclusion, I would like to make five recommendations to the department:

- My first and most important recommendation is for the department to focus on maintaining existing strengths, in part by doing what it already does well. I have been impressed with the attention the department devotes to continuous reflection on teaching and related issues. The department's commitment to best practice in this area is impressive. As the programme is already excellent, the most desirable changes are likely to be incremental and involve minor modifications of the teaching provision or teaching methods rather than any radical transformation that would unbalance the programme. The department deserves to be known as the provider of a leading MA programme in comparative politics.
- My second recommendation is for the department to reflect more on recruitment and retention – while available statistics do not suggest that there are any major problems in this area and an increase in the size of the programme may generate both costs and benefits, the high quality of the programme suggests that more students could benefit from the excellent education provided by the department. Given that the Faculty has identified the expansion of the Master's programmes as a key priority in years to come, expanding the student body at the Master's level may become increasingly important. It might also be possible to improve conversion rates of offers into accepted places – while the conversion rate of 42% in 2017 is already quite good, especially compared to some other programmes in the faculty, it might be worth reflecting on strategies for boosting such figures. More effective dissemination of information about the excellent quality of the programme might generate even more interest in it, as might some further emphasis on employability strategies. There might even be some potential to recruit international students, if the university wanted to pursue this, provided some adjustments to the teaching, such as an English language

pathway, are made. Needless to say, such a decision should not be made lightly and might also depend on strategic issues facing the faculty and university as a whole. If such changes were to be implemented, this would require careful planning and reflection.

- My third recommendation is to reflect on the goals of the programme. As it currently stands, the programme places great emphasis on research and research training. This is undeniably a key strength and a distinctive feature of the MA programme in Comparative Politics at the University of Bergen. While research should obviously be an integral part of any advanced Master's programme, there are obvious trade-offs associated with such a clear research focus. In particular, notwithstanding the excellent core course and the high quality of the options on offer, substantive topics in comparative politics receive somewhat less emphasis than in many other programmes across the world and even in Norway. This raises the question whether the current weighting of the the research component (especially the 60 credit thesis) is optimal. In my view, there is no obvious answer – much depends on the priorities of the programme and the intended learning outcomes (see also programme censor's report, January 2016). More generally, it should be noted that research training and independent thesis research promote a variety of transferable skills. Since this is a key strength of the programme, weakening this focus could impinge on the distinctiveness of the programme. On the other hand, one might also argue that a well-rounded training in different areas of comparative politics may be an asset on the job market, especially for those not embarking on research careers. In such cases a variety of generalist skills and a strong grounding in a range of substantive issues may be useful. It should be noted that there is no consensus on this issue among the students I spoke to. The thesis is also a popular element of the programme, so there are compelling reasons for maintaining the current structure, not least since it reinforces the research focus of the programme. My only suggestion is that the department might wish to reflect on the balance of these components from time to time to ensure that there is a compelling and explicit rationale for whatever model is adopted. This is important, not least since other Norwegian universities tend to have 30 or 45 credit theses, with some universities, like NTNU, even offering students the choice of a shorter or longer thesis.
- My fourth recommendation is for the department to consider the desirability of introducing a clearer substantive focus or thematic pathways. This might strengthen the identity of the programme and also introduce greater predictability for the students. Even though they might not know which specific options will be on offer in a particular year, they would know that they could specialise in electoral politics or representation, for example. This might also strengthen the connections between the programme and the research groups in the department by highlighting signature teaching and research areas. However, the potential benefits need to be weighed up against the costs of introducing such changes. While there could still be a lot of flexibility in terms of specific options and the areas of specialisation could be quite

broad, this might require some additional planning and constrain the department in terms of maintaining such pathways. Some students may also prefer not to specialise and to opt for a general pathway consisting of a wider range of options on different topics.

- My fifth recommendation would be for the department and the faculty to reflect on the role of the programme censor. It is clear that having a programme censor can be a very useful and important tool for ensuring quality control and stimulating reflection on best practice within a department and a programme, and I certainly hope that my appointment has contributed to these objectives. It has been a great pleasure to visit the department and to serve as its programme censor for eight years. Nevertheless, I would encourage the department and the wider university to have a general discussion about the most appropriate format for these evaluations in the future. In particular, given that this programme is already excellent and that changes from one year to the next tend to be minor, it might be more useful and a better use of resources to commission such evaluations less frequently (maybe once every 2-3 years rather than on an annual basis). Such evaluations could then be coupled with slightly longer visits to the department and focus on a strategic evaluation of the programme and broader challenges. Given that the internal processes of the Department of Comparative Politics are sound, this ensures an excellent basis for continuous and ongoing quality control on an annual basis. Therefore, the most important role of the programme censor might be as a strategic complement to the internal processes that already conform to international best practice, but ultimately this will obviously depend on the needs of the department and the faculty and the areas where advice from a programme censor is most useful.