

Program Auditor's Report on the University of Bergen's MPA Program

Submitted by:

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1. Background Information

In pursuance of the letter under reference no. 2017/12200-ULS dated February 8, 2018, I have been appointed by the Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Bergen (UiB) as a Program Auditor to evaluate UiB's flagship Master's Program in Public Administration (MPA) offered by the Department of Administration and Organization Theory. The Program Auditor's first visit lasted for two working days, December 5 and 6, 2018. During this period, he met with the Head of Department, Professor Jacob Aars, Deputy Head of Department, Associate Professor Jan Froestad, Head of Education, Associate Professor Dag Runar Jacobsen, MPA Program Director, Professor Ishtiaq Jamil, and Emeritus Professor Steinar Askvik. In addition, the Auditor also met with four international students, three MPA and a PhD. The latter also holds an UiB MPA degree.

On December 5, the first meeting took place with the Head, Deputy Head, and Head of Education where they explained to the Program Auditor about the purpose of the audit, as well as the expectations and duties of the Program Auditor. At the outset, Professor Aars informed the Program Auditor that the Department had recently revised the MPA program and the primary task of the Auditor in his first visit would be to focus on the revised program. This has essentially limited the scope and task of the Program Auditor. Therefore, this report has devoted its attention to assess the revised MPA program as per the given guidelines.

2. Evaluation of the MPA Program

2.1 Program Structure

The MPA program under audit is a two-year program divided into four semesters and carries 120 ECTS. The medium of instruction is English. In the first semester, students take three required/mandatory courses, which are (1) Organization Theory (10 ECTS), (2) Public Policy (10 ECTS), and (3) Qualitative Methods (10 ECTS). In the second semesters, students need to take another two mandatory courses and they are (4) Research Design (10 ECTS) and (5) Quantitative Methods (10 ECTS). In this semester, students have the opportunity to take a third course, which is an elective (10 ECTS), stems from four research groups ((i) Globalization and Development, (ii) Knowledge, Politics, and Organization, (iii) Political Organization and Multilevel Governance, and (iv) Discretion and Paternalism) of the Department. Both third and fourth semesters are devoted to field study and writing a thesis, which carries 60 ECTS.

It appears from the program structure that it is heavily loaded with research-related courses, 90 out of 120 ECTS are allocated to two methods courses, a research design course, and a thesis. This essentially helps students to gain in-depth knowledge on research tools, techniques, and methods and prepares them to apply the knowledge and skills to a real life situation. On the other hand, students are allowed to take only three courses on organizations, public administration, public policy, and governance. The ECTS allocated to these three courses (30 ECTS) are one third of

the research-related courses and one fourth of the total ECTS of the degree. It is therefore unclear whether offering of a limited number of courses on core issues such as public administration, public policy, and governance supports achieving the Program's learning outcome "know recent theoretical developments and research on organizations, public administration, public policy, and governance."

Although the students Program Auditor interviewed expressed their overall satisfaction with the program and the quality of teaching, they raised their concern about the lack of diversity of courses and too much focus on research. On the contrary, both the Department and the Program leaders opined that the distinctiveness and credibility of the program is its focus on research. In this context, the Auditor compared and analyzed the UiB's MPA program with three well-known MPA programs offered by NYU Wagner, SIPA Columbia University, and the University of Minnesota and found that the UiB's MPA offerings are very limited both in core and elective courses, as well as the fact that the former does not offer specialization.

2.2 Number of Students in the Program

It has been reported during the visit that the MPA program has only 10 full-time students. There has been a sharp decline in the number of students over the past years due to the change in Norwegian Government policy. The Government is not granting scholarships, including Lånekassen, to international students. As a result, students from the Global South, who were historically the core of this program, are greatly affected due to the absence of government financed scholarships. As such, the number of international students has dwindled down to a number that risks the sustainability of the program. Although university education is almost free, Norway's high living cost and [restrictive] immigration system and perhaps less awareness among prospective students, among other things, are major impediments to attract self-financed students to come and study.

2.3 Internship Opportunity

The students with whom the Auditor had meetings with all envisaged for an internship opportunity either in Bergen or adjacent areas to gain practical knowledge to understand how an organization, either public or non-profit, operates in practice in a Western European country. This kind of experience is very beneficial for students from developing countries since, after contextualizing according to their local context, they can use them in their native countries. This will be an added value to pursue an advance degree in public administration from a developed country. The current structure of the problem does not allow students to get such hands-on experiences.

2.4 Diversity of Faculty

Students informed that all MPA courses are taught primarily by two faculty members. These two also supervise most of the theses. Students expect that other faculty will also teach in the program to enrich them with diversity of knowledge and skills.

2.5 Grading Scale

The Faculty of Social Sciences at UiB uses a five-point grading scale; A, B, C, D and F. They are not suffixed with '+' and/or '-'. As a result, if a student misses an "A" grade for any reason, s/he ends up receiving a "B", neither an "A-" nor a "B+". Students consider the existing grading scale as a barrier to pursue a doctoral degree in a credible academic institution and/or starting a professional career as grades play a vital role in selecting candidates.

2.6 Non-academic Issue: Integration with Norwegian Students

Historically, the relationship between Norwegian (Hovedfag and now master) and MPA students was weak, which still continues. Both faculty and students informed the Auditor that several initiatives have been taken to bridge the gap between the two but it seems that not much has been done to improve the relationship.

3. Suggestions

In order to overcome the issues above, the following suggestions are presented for the consideration of the appropriate authority:

3.1 Program Structure

Although it is understood from the Auditor's meeting with the Department leadership that they do not want to make any further revision to the current program structure, it will be useful to provide students with more choices in elective courses rather than limiting them to take one from the four available options. It is therefore recommended to include courses such as Human Resources Management in the Public Sector, Nonprofit Management, Strategic Management for Public Organizations, and Financial Management in the Public Sector.

3.2 Number of Students in the Program

In order to increase the number of students in the program, it is recommended that the Department signs agreements with credible MPA/MPP programs for a one-semester student exchange, which will help to increase the number of students in each class. If the agreement is signed with the universities of developing countries, UiB may need to provide them with some kind of financial support to cover their food and accommodation expenses.

3.3 Internship Opportunity

It will be a useful addition if the Program leadership considers to offer an [optional] internship opportunity (ECTS: 0, pass or fail option) for international students during the summer, preferably for a period of six weeks before they leave to their home countries for field study.

3.4 Grading Scale

Although this is an UiB-wide policy decision, it is recommended that the Department attempts to communicate the students' concerns about the current grading scale to the University Administration and try to bring back the old grading scale (A⁺, A, A⁻ and so on) for the reasons noted earlier.

3.5 Integration with Norwegian Students

In order to overcome the integration challenges between Norwegian and international students, it is recommended that the Department seeks suggestions from faculty and students as to how to improve the relationship between the two. One suggestion may be to organize more social gatherings involving both group of students, which may subsequently help improve the situation.