



DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN STUDIES

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To: The University of Bergen, Faculty of Social Sciences
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Programme evaluation report, Bachelor programme in European Studies (BASV-EUR) 2021

1) Background Information

This evaluation report covers the year 2020 of the Bachelor programme in European Studies (BASV-EUR), and is the third report out of four reports. Due to the Corona pandemic, there was a rapid transition to online and/or hybrid forms of teaching during especially spring 2020. The department of Comparative Politics has asked the evaluators to focus on this transition and the consequences for teaching, in evaluation reports of the year 2020. The mandate was: *"Vurder instituttets koronatiltak knyttet til undervisning siden mars 2020"*.

The report is based on documentation provided by the Department of Comparative Politics, and video meetings in Zoom on the 10 December 2020, with Director of Studies Leiv Marsteintredet, study administrator Olga Elise Frøyland, and Kjetil Evjen, who is the course convenor of the introductory course EUR101, as well as with a student representative, Nikolai Haukø Svihus. In addition, I have also had email communications with the course instructors for the EUR103 course, Ines Prodöhl (Department of Archaeology, History, Cultural Studies and Religion), and the EUR105 course, Raimondas Ibenskas (Department of Comparative Politics). Both of them have provided me written reflections regarding the change to online teaching. The documentation consists of course evaluations, statistics regarding student performance, and results from a specific student survey to all SAMPOL students, focusing on their perceptions on the different teaching adaptations due to Corona.

The disposition is as follows: in the next section I will discuss aspects of overall concern for the programme, followed by a section that will focus on each of the EUR courses, and a final section with overall conclusions.

2) Overall situation for the study programme, department and university

The Bachelor programme in European Studies is administrated by the Department of Comparative Politics at the University of Bergen since 2012. The university closed completely 12 March, with very short notice. Both staff and students have pointed out that this decision came very quickly and unexpected, which caused different kinds of problem, i.e. to be able to collect necessary equipment and documentation needed to work, teach and study from home. This strict lockdown lasted until mid-April, after which restrictions were gradually lifted. When the autumn semester began, teaching took place on campus. Due to increased spread of infection, there were two separate periods of teaching and working remotely also during the autumn. Hence, during 2020, the students have had several different forms of teaching.

One aspect pointed out in meetings with department representatives is the initial lack of access to good remote teaching tools at the University of Bergen. When the transition to remote teaching occurred in March 2020, individual departments and teachers had to come up with their own solutions, and were, especially in the beginning, dependent on free/trial editions of programmes. This was of course very difficult for staff and students. The lack of alternative tools for online meeting and teaching is a bit surprising; not least in light of societal sustainability goals and internal debates in academia on how to reduce unnecessary travelling. There has also been criticism towards UiB regarding a slow process before licences and programmes were generally accessible to staff and students. As an example, due to the lengthy process, Zoom was not properly used in teaching to any larger extent until the autumn semester.

Connected to this unpreparedness for distance working/teaching tools, is the steep learning curve for all staff and students, as well as IT support. Several of the teachers I have been in contact with explain that this situation severely affected the teaching in the beginning, and that videos had to be recorded and posted on the student web portal, at a later time point, which was less than ideal. Some members of staff have argued that in hindsight this was unnecessary work, as relatively few students actually looked at these videos at a later stage. Moreover, staff had very varying experience of these kind of programmes, as well as varying access to necessary equipment, high speed internet connection etc. which further contributed to uneven quality and sometimes delayed teaching. The changing situation also led to mass communication initially being difficult which put a lot of pressure on the department management. Students also claimed that communication was initially problematic, and they experienced a lack of information.

During the autumn of 2020, there was a better preparedness for remote teaching. Not only were more digital programmes and tools available via UiB licences, but the experiences made during spring were also integrated in the planning of the autumn courses. The UiB could initially offer on-campus teaching (with rules of 1 m distance, 1/3 of seats) in combination with video streaming. Similarly, seminars were offered with a choice for students to participate either in a group on campus or a group online. Teachers could chose to either teach live in classroom (with video streaming), live in Zoom, or to record a lecture in Kaltura. However, there was a preparedness for switching to only online teaching if needed. Naturally, this took much more planning time for teachers, but it turned out to be a good preparation as already in September the university closed due to increased infection rates. It opened again in October, but was then closed again in mid-November.

The student representative noted that during spring, the students assumed the situation to be temporary. Hence the acceptance of the quick change, lack of information and technical issues with online teaching was quite high. However, during autumn, the situation 'has lost its charm'.

Many students feel lonely and that it is difficult to motivate themselves to study. Physical teaching in class rooms is much preferred, and they feel more easily distracted during online lectures. Although the forewarning were a bit longer in the autumn, there was still complaints regarding the information. UiB does send out text messages to students, which is good, but the information is not always clear enough about the details.

The crisis handling of the Corona situation at the UiB has raised criticism, from staff and students. It was pointed out that UiB took a stricter approach to interpreting the legal rules compared to other universities in Norway. The department management at SAMPOL points out that some early decisions were taken late and without sufficiently taking into account the preconditions and organisation of teaching. The department therefore often took consequential decisions for the organisation of the teaching and examination before decisions had been made at higher levels in the organisation. Although they were able to fairly quickly adapt to the transition, they would have liked a crisis management of UiB with more insights regarding the organisation of teaching at the departmental level.

Students have been very understanding of the situation, as the pandemic has made rapid transitions necessary. It is however obvious from the student surveys and the discussion with the student representative that it is much more challenging for students with online teaching. Many students feel alone and find it difficult to motivate themselves to study. They miss the social interactions with other students and teachers at campus. They appreciate the teachers' attempts to come up with solutions and alternatives during the rapid transition in spring. However, they are critical when it comes to the lack of information, or late information, from the UiB regarding the changes from campus to online teaching. During autumn, it seems to have been higher expectations of better technical quality and online teaching. Hence it is not surprising to find comments in the student survey complaining about technical problems. They unsurprisingly prefer to have lectures and seminars on campus. For remote teaching, the impression is somewhat mixed. Some students prefer live lectures and seminars in Zoom, others like to have videos they can return to and watch at their convenience. Students are different, and also the courses are different. There does not seem to be a 'one size fits all' solution here, but rather the choice of type of remote teaching in a course must consider different aspects.

2) Online teaching consequences for different courses

In this section, I will discuss each of the three European Studies courses in more detail. The discussion will be based on information provided by course convenors of the three courses, the meeting with the student representative, and the course evaluations. I will start with the two courses that were taught during spring 2020, EUR103 and EUR105, and then discuss the EUR101, which was taught during the autumn of 2020.

EUR 103 Europe after 1945: Resources, Demography, Economy

The course instructor, Ines Prodöhl, is associate professor in history. She has kindly provided me with some reflections on how the course was affected by the Corona crisis. The course EUR103 was half-way through in March when the university closed down and they had to switch from physical to online teaching from one week to the other. As already discussed above, this change was very difficult as the UiB did not yet offer good online teaching tools, and most teachers were unexperienced regarding online teaching. Ines comments that:

“The transition was rather rough, as we were of course not experienced with how to teach remotely. Back then, we were advised to record our lectures as videos (either in person or as powerpoints with voices). I truly regret that I followed this advice. It was neither to the benefit of the students nor to mine. Making these videos consumed almost all of my working capacities, I lost contact with the students and I believe, they lost contact with each other as well.”

The student representative confirmed that the recorded lectures or PowerPoint slides with audio were less appreciated among the students, and that some of these recordings were not even watched by more than a few students. It seems that the general uploading of recorded lectures on the student portal is not enough to engage the students and actively contribute to their learning. As indicated by the student survey however, some students appreciate the opportunity to watch videos at their own convenience.

In the planning for the course to start in January 2021, Ines appreciated the greater freedom to choose between different tools, and between live and pre-recorded lectures. From the experiences made during the spring 2020, she has now only had live lectures in Zoom without any recordings, and most of the other teachers on the course do the same. It is also interesting to note that the one teacher who did chose to make pre-recorded films, has done so in a different manner. He has chosen a form of flipped classroom strategy instead, where he creates smaller videos for the students to watch beforehand. At the scheduled time for the lecture, he then instead address the students’ questions. This is a very good example of the steep learning curve for most teachers, and how the different tools and formats for online teaching can work equally well, but for different purposes, and if the pedagogic strategy behind the choice is clear – something which was obviously impossible in spring 2020.

As for the examination, this course traditionally has a school exam. Due to the Corona situation, it was changed to a take home exam. It was still in the style of a school exam, and hence the students wrote a 6-hours exam from home (although they received two hours extra time due to technical issues and problems). The experiences of this form of exam at home was not very satisfactory to the course teachers. For the spring of 2021 they have instead changed the style of exam. The students will now write an essay style take home exam at the end of the term. For the essay, the students will have one week time and they can choose between two task/questions, and use all course literature during the essay. It will be interesting to see how this change of exam style will affect the results.

EUR105 European Union Institutions and Politics

In the spring 2020, there was a new main course instructor for the EUR105 course: Raimondas Ibenskas, associate professor at the department of Comparative Politics. He has kindly shared his impressions of the change to online teaching in March 2020 with me in an email. This change affected both lectures and seminars in the course. There was also a planned guest lecturer event with Doru Frantescu (Votewatch) which had to be cancelled. Raimondas states that his impression is that the quality of the lectures was reduced due to this change. He used predominantly Kaltura recordings (several short recordings per lecture) for the lectures. Although he thinks this worked fairly well given the circumstances, it was not a 100% replacement of in-class experience.

This course normally has a mandatory attendance of 75% of the seminars, but this was also cancelled due to the pandemic. Raimondas has also shared reflections from the seminar leader,

regarding the digital seminars. The seminar leader noted a drop in student turnout, but this seems likely to be a result of the cancellation of the compulsory attendance, rather than the switch from on campus to digital format. However, the quality of the discussions in digital seminars seem to have been of quite high quality. The smaller number of students who actually did attend were better prepared. Typically, a smaller number of students is also beneficial for the discussions in seminars. The seminar leader also highlighted that there are good opportunities for student engagement in Zoom (e.g. poll function), but technical issues (e.g. bad connection) were an issue in the seminars. One reflection is that online seminars seem to be not at all very liked in the overall student survey, despite the relatively good opportunities provided in e.g. Zoom. Although this was the result of the overall SAMPOL student survey, and not this particular course, it is an interesting aspect, worthy of further investigation. Not least as the seminars in EUR105 have been highlighted by students as very good and important before. The drop in attendance when the mandatory attendance is removed, is unfortunately unsurprising. Typically, we see the pattern that the students who might need the seminars the most are the ones who are most likely to drop out. I would therefore recommend to keep the mandatory attendance even if the seminars are online. Especially in this case it seems to have been very good discussions. Another thing to consider is thus to perhaps switch to shorter seminars in smaller groups, to increase the participation of those attending.

One unique and very good feature of the EUR105 is the mandatory assignment (digital deliverable) which unfortunately also had to be cancelled. Raimondas states:

“The decision was triggered by the students suggesting that they find it very difficult to work in groups without being able to meet in person. Since this was early days in the pandemic, the time at which different range of solutions to digital teaching have not yet been very much developed, I supported the decision to cancel the digital deliverable assignment. This was quite unfortunate as quite a lot work has already been done in working on the assignment including the student discussions in the seminars and the session with the UiB Learning Lab instructing students how to prepare their deliverables.”

The student representative confirmed how group work was extremely difficult as the university shut down, and they had no place to work together. From an infection point of view, working together in a close confinement of a dorm room is not ideal either. As pointed out by Raimondas in the quotation above, this was further complicated by the lack of available remote working tools at the UiB. Now, with more digital cooperative tools available also for students, it makes sense to keep the digital deliverable and incorporate the remote group working as training for future team work at a distance.

The exam was not affected as this course already had a take home exam as final examination. The exam took place as originally scheduled, and as in previous years, students had to answer one question (out of two) in a 4000-word essay. Raimondas stated he was quite satisfied with the quality of work submitted for the final examination, and that the external examiner was similarly fairly positive about the quality of final examinations. The student representative had no specific comment on the content nor format of the exam, but pointed out that it was challenging to write several home exams at the same time.

EUR 101 Innføring i europeisk historie og politikk (Introduction to European History and Politics)

In the autumn of 2020, the new students started on campus with the welcoming weeks, but had to change to online teaching. In the meeting with course instructor Kjetil Evjen, senior lecturer

in comparative politics, he pointed out that they had planned to teach the course normally on campus, but they had to change to online and/or hybrid teaching rather soon. The last of the history lectures was shifted online. Kjetil were able to hold most of his own lectures in a lecture room with only few students attending physically, and the others followed the streamed version online. Those who attended physically seemed to be happy to be able to attend. His impression is that it was the same group of student who came and participated in all activities, whereas another group of students were more passive. One of the learning experience throughout this course has been the importance of strict deadlines and scheduled time points for when things should be seen (if recorded lectures) and/or done – otherwise there is a high risk of the course learning becoming too unstructured or ‘floating’.

Kjetil also commented that the seminars online were not as good as the campus seminars. Even if it became better during the autumn, they still experienced problems with black screens and no camera, as well as very low interaction and discussion. As mentioned above, the student survey seem to confirm that students prefer to have seminars on campus, and they are not very fond of online seminars. Although not particularly referenced to this course, it is relevant to consider in what ways the seminars may be better adapted to the online format, e.g. shorter sessions in smaller groups, breakout rooms, polls etc. to increase the interaction.

The exam for this course has traditionally been a school exam. It was exchanged for a two-part exam where a home assignment written during the semester was combined with a short home exam (8 hours) towards the end of the semester. The first part was an assignment that was followed up by the seminar leader, and counted 30% of the final grade. The last home exam counted 70% of the final grade. The short time for the second part was considered important in order to motivate the students to study regularly throughout the course, and decrease the risk of plagiarism or cooperation. The overall results are positive in terms of good throughput and quality of the submitted exams. Kjetil has noted, after completing the examination, that the quality of both these assignments was noticeably better than in a normal semester. In a follow up email to me after all the grading was completed, he wrote:

“We were in advance somewhat worried about an increased degree of plagiarism and cheating on the exam, and we looked especially for that in the exam pile. Fortunately, it was not a problem, and we found no signs of too similar assignments etc. So the new form of exam was a positive experience.”

This is a somewhat more resource-intensive than just a home exam, but both Kjetil and Christard Hoffmann, who is responsible for the history part of the course, agree that it works well in a relatively small course such as EUR101. In fact, Christard has recommended that they should continue with this exam model next autumn as well. My opinion is that this form of examination also address some of the issues raised by students in my evaluation report two years ago. At that time, the students I met asked for more varied examination forms, and the possibility for more in-depth learning and writing, instead of only a school exam. In other words, this is a good example of how the otherwise negative aspect of (forced) online teaching actually can lead to good course development. However, as we know from the overall situation and the outcome in other courses/programmes/universities, the cases of detected suspected plagiarism have also increased as a consequence of more take home/online examinations. This is something to consider, not least if the same (or very similar) questions are posed again next time. It is also important that the university anti-plagiarism programme is up to date, and good enough to capture the broad amount of online sources as well as previous student submissions.

3) Concluding discussion

The overall impression is that the shift to online teaching at the UiB in general happened very quickly, with almost no time to prepare, and without necessary preconditions in place at the university level (e.g. digital solutions, programmes and licences). It seems surprising from an outsider's perspective that a renowned university such as UiB did not have better access to remote working tools, as the sustainable agenda and shift to more online meetings have been ongoing within academia for quite some time. However, regardless of these institutional and organisational preconditions, the staff and management of SAMPOL and the European Studies programme seem to have done their best to quickly adapt to online teaching, and try out different teaching forms and technical solutions. The university also eventually arranged for better access to the necessary digital programmes, which meant that the options available for teachers and students were much better in the autumn. The lessons learned from experience during spring also meant that some early mistakes could be avoided, and that new routines were in place to facilitate communication between teachers, administration and students. The fact that throughput and quality of exams for most courses remain high, speaks of the intense work done by staff, in order to provide a good educational experience for the students, despite the situation. It also speaks of the students' capacity to adapt and handle the situation, despite all the negative consequences for them. However, the statistics of throughput seem to indicate a slight increase in dropout in 2020, or at least a delay of submission of final bachelor theses. If this is correct, it is probably wise to consider following up on those students and perhaps offer an extra opportunity for a retakes, in light of the extra ordinary study conditions in 2020.

A takeaway from the shift to online teaching in the courses is that there has been a huge amount of learning from spring 2020, which has influenced the planning of the courses for 2021. One example is that the information online (Mitt UiB, webpages etc) needs to be even more detailed and up to date than normal, when the otherwise typical oral clarifications in the classroom, and spread of word between students, do not happen as easy.

Another thing is to make sure that the style and form of lectures are not forced to fit one model. Rather – just as with campus teaching – allow forms of teaching to vary and adapt to what is suitable to the pedagogic aims of the course/module/teacher. But the more flexibility (e.g. pre-recorded lectures accessible at the student portal), the stronger the need to also incorporate strict dates for seminars, Q&A, flipped classroom or submissions, in order to keep the pace of the course and regular studying.

It is interesting that the online seminars seem to have been less appreciated, even during the autumn when Zoom was available, and the teachers and students were more experienced. I would suggest to make a deeper investigation to try to find out more about this, if there is a particular pattern. Something that we learned in Gothenburg was the need for smaller seminar groups (and thus shorter time per group), as it seemed to work better in zoom. It has also worked well to incorporate breakout rooms and polls to further activate the students, also during seminars (e.g. allowing them “to get started” for five minutes to discuss a question, or identify a problem in groups of 2-3, before returning to the slightly larger seminar group). We have also demanded cameras to be on for mandatory seminars.

Group work is extra challenging online, and especially so when students are to produce a digital deliverable together, as in EUR105. This is one aspect where I think there is potential to further investigate online team tools for group work. It is highly likely that future work life will be more about remote working. Having this as an extra bonus, in addition to the already great

experience of learning how to produce media content, would set this course (and thus the programme) even more apart in the future, and prepare your students for their future careers in yet another aspect.

Regarding exams, the typical solution most of have done is to change to take home exams. The increased number of cases of suspected plagiarism in general, and the difficulty students experience by having several home exams in parallel in the end of the semester, should be considered. There are new tools being developed for alternative forms of examination online, which might be useful – if not else as a complement earlier during the semester. The aspect of making sure students keep up their pace of studying might also indicate a need for more, but shorter, submissions during the course. The changes done in EUR101 is a very good example of this. And there is of course, as always, the discussion about what kind of questions that are best suited for take home exams when there is more time and full access to the internet and books.

Finally, the experiences learned from 2020 indicate that the preparedness for quick shifts to online teaching is now much improved. Teachers and students are also more experienced with online tools. This is something to consider even when most courses will return to ‘normal’ teaching at campus. There might be some aspects of remote teaching that are worth keeping also for the future. One example could be the opportunity to invite guest lectures (and/or alumni) more easily if they do not have to travel to Bergen, especially people who you would like to participate regularly. Another suggestion could be to have thesis supervision in Zoom with students who live further away (or use it when one part has a cold). Or, one could also be creative and think about new courses or modules, or organising some kind of parallel seminar series or meet up for students, e.g. when they are studying abroad, or studying their profile subject, to keep the European Studies programme identity stronger.

Göteborg, 1 March 2021

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