

# ÅRSRAPPORT FRÅ PROGRAMSENSOR

University of Bergen  
Faculty of Psychology

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## **Annual report from the programme auditor**

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Period of appointment: 2019-2023.

Period to which the report applies: 2019-2020.

### *Introduction*

The master programme in child welfare at University of Bergen has been available for many years, and has developed into a valuable resource for a professional field with immense complexity and high demands on professional competencies. In this report the focus is on the course MABARN 351: Master's thesis in child welfare. The master's thesis in child welfare encompasses 60 credits, in other words half the programme. A new article format for the thesis has recently been introduced and therefore this assessment is focused on recommendations and elements that can strengthen the structure of the course by improving guidelines for this new format. Further, the contents of the course are assessed in how they enhance acquiring knowledge and writing skills in order to contribute to new scientific evidence.

For the course MABARN 351 the following materials were materials for the evaluation:

- Description, content and learning outcomes of the course master's thesis [MABARN 351].
- Guidelines: Retningslinjer for mastergradsoppgaven ved Master i barnevern, Universitetet i Bergen.
- List of master theses that used an article format with their respective grades.
- Five master theses applying the new article format. Graded A, A, B, B, D.

### *The guidelines*

The guidelines for the course MABARN351 follow a standard format. They are detailed

and provide the student (and the teachers) with clear instructions for the contents and forms of the preparation and writing of the master's thesis. The preceding courses in semesters 1 and 2 contain important preparations in terms of knowledge of the field of child welfare. Especially the research methods courses are fundamental as preparation for the thesis work, since they include research methods and research planning. It is optional for the students to choose between qualitative and quantitative methods, so students become relatively narrow in their methodological competence, which is also reflected in the mainly qualitative design of the theses. There is one quantitative approach and no mixed-methods theses in the sample of five theses that were included in the materials for this evaluation.

The guidelines are specific in terms of the contents (the main elements) of the thesis and also very clear in stipulating a preceding project plan (8-10 pages). The total number of pages of the finalised thesis depends on whether it is a monography or an article with a corresponding additional introduction. Also, if the students prefer to work together (max two) the additional demands are clearly stated compared with working alone. In all, the guidelines appear to be enough detailed for the students to follow, and are also providing the students with quality criteria, at least as precise as possible. Scientific quality is a matter of judgment, and depends on the research design, access to data, the competence of the student in terms of knowledge of the field of research, theoretical and methodological advancement, and writing skills. A challenge in writing the thesis is to be able to represent all these quality aspects in a logical, readable and publishable manner.

The option to write an article is more and more commonly used in master's programmes internationally. The size of the course MABARN 351, makes it possible to do this, while a shorter/smaller thesis course would place a problematic restriction on this possibility. Having a full academic year for the master thesis enhances the writing of a good research review, designing a smaller empirical study, to collect data, to execute analyses and to discuss findings more carefully. And, not least important, it enhances to condense all this work into a research article within a relatively limited number of words. The guidelines are clear in the level of ambition, i.e. to generate a publishable research paper. It is also positive to see that master theses become published in refereed journals, either in Norway or internationally. It is no doubt that students after this course will have good knowledge of the demands that will meet them if and when they plan to continue towards a ph.d.

In terms of the contents of the thesis, the guidelines are very good and clear. A suggestion is to be even more specific and clear in what is expected in the discussion and concluding parts of the thesis. There is an ambition to generate new scientific knowledge from the work the students do, and it could be of some help for them if they were encouraged to spell this out, i.e. in what ways their theses add to the state of knowledge. Additionally, it is recommendable to further develop the guidelines about how to address implications for policy and practice. The five theses that were presented for this evaluation are relatively vague in this sense, and perhaps a bit too anxious in how they phrase the value of their work.

As a part of the course, the students are required to be present their work at two seminars. It is not clear from the guidelines how these seminars are organised and if the students have a role to comment on their fellow students. In some master's

programmes, the role to comment is assessed and a requirement for the students. This is a way to strengthen the students' capability to analyse and criticize scientific work, and may also be a factor that can improve their own argumentation and academic writing. It could be considered to include a requirement for the students to comment on their fellow students' works in at least one of the seminars. In order to improve the writing skills of the students, a possible way would be to require them to deliver their comments as a short review. To have this in written form could also be a basis for the assessment of the students' performances.

### *The quality of the theses*

The impression from the five theses that were attached for this evaluation, is that the idea to design the master's thesis as an article for peer reviewed journals has been successful. Even if only one (?) of the articles are published as of today, it is likely that at least two of the others will be possible to publish, one of them in an international journal.

The model with an introduction plus a manuscript ready for submission appears to be fruitful. In the introduction there is space to expand some of the issues that could not find space within the article format. The five theses indicate that working this way has been positive, even if the quality of the introduction sections varies. This is not surprising since the achievements and writing skills vary between students. However, the samples vary from ok to very good, and all of them are correctly awarded a pass. Obviously, the preceding courses have given the students both good enough knowledge of the child welfare research field, and methodological skills, even if the optional methods courses may lead to a relatively narrowed methodological competence. Also, the students appear to be well trained in how to search for literature, and to condense it into a usable research review. This is very important since it is in relation to this review the theses can be said to exceed current knowledge.

The dilemma with co-authorship seems to be solvable. The thesis is entirely written by the students, while the articles engage supervisors and senior researchers as co-authors. It is possible to do this transition according to the Vancouver codex, even if it requires that co-authors can translate supervision of the thesis into co-authorship. Another dilemma that is inherent in the transition from thesis to article is the requirements for ethical review. It seems as this dilemma is solved by having the ethical permissions ready from the start. It is generally problematic to get ethical permissions after that data is collected; permissions that are sometimes required by the journals in order to get published. It can also be good training to apply for ethical approval, and it can be seen as an important competence for future ph.d. candidates.

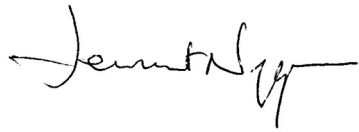
In terms of grading the judgments of the five attached theses seems reasonable. I might want to change one of the "A":s into a (strong) B and I also find the "D"-case to be at least close to a "C". Still, I have no doubts that the grading is done according to the not entirely unambiguous grading criteria.

As mentioned in the previous section, the theses/articles could be strengthened in terms of more elaborate discussions of findings in relation to both the state of the art, and in terms of relevance for policy and practice.

## *Summary*

The child welfare master programme has a good structure, good content and is implemented with a well-developed idea for student learning. My recommendations based on this evaluation are:

- Consider possibilities to prepare students for more than either qualitative or quantitative approaches (e.g. mixed-methods).
- Consider to develop the guidelines with more elaborate instructions regarding the contents of the Discussion and Conclusion parts of the thesis.
- Consider to develop a more explicit demand to formulate the unique contribution of the studies.
- Consider to train and instruct the students to be more self-confident in the value of their work for practice and policies in the fields of child welfare.
- Consider to be more specific about the role of the students to comment on fellow students' work in the seminars, and to add a requirement on the students to present their comments in written form, as a way to improve academic writing skills.



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## PROGRAMME AUDITOR – MASTER PROGRAM IN CHILD WELFARE

The assessment of the course MABARN 351 was focused on recommendations and elements that can strengthen the structure of the course by improving guidelines for the article format for the master thesis.

- Guidelines for the course MABARN351

The guidelines were positively evaluated. It was highlighted that these guidelines are detailed and provided the student with clear instructions for the contents and forms of the preparation and writing of the master's thesis. However, the program auditor suggests that the students may become relatively narrow in their methodological competence because the master theses mainly focus on the qualitative design of the theses. The auditor suggests possibilities to prepare students for more than either qualitative or quantitative approaches (e.g. mixed methods).

- We recognize the importance of diverse research methodologies; however, our methodological courses prioritize mainly qualitative and quantitative methodologies. It is possible that the use of mix/methods are not feasible. The methodological courses are managed for the 3 master's programs, so any modification cannot be taken in parallel by a single program. In this sense, our program finds it difficult to apply this recommendation.

- Guidelines for Master theses

It was mentioned that the guidelines are very good and clear for the students, however, it was suggested that these could be more specific and clear in what is expected in the discussion and concluding parts of the thesis (e.g. in what ways their theses add to the state of knowledge and how to address implications for policy and practice). The auditor suggests i) to develop the guidelines with more elaborate instructions regarding the contents of the Discussion and Conclusion parts of the thesis, ii) to develop a more explicit demand to formulate the unique contribution of the studies, iii) to train and instruct the students to be more self-confident in the value of their work for practice and policies in the fields of child welfare.

- We agree with these suggestions. Under RETHOS, these modifications can be relatively easy to implement. Our program can review the guidelines for master's theses, and in addition, we can strengthen the seminars to help students improve their critical capacity to analyse and criticize scientific work and improve their own argumentation and writing academic skills.

- Quality of the theses

It was highlighted that the idea to design the master's thesis as an article for peer-reviewed journals has been successful. The five theses indicate that working this way has been positive, even if the quality varies. The auditor suggests to consider to be more specific about the role of the students to comment on fellow students' work in the seminars, and to add a requirement on the students to present their comments in written form, as a way to improve academic writing skills.

- We agree with the suggestions made. As for the specific seminar you mentioned, we believe that the seminar can be improved by requesting written feedback from students. Undoubtedly, this activity will strengthen the academic skills of students and strengthen their critical capacity to read and comment on the work of other classmates.