**Discussion note: Revision of HGO course portfolio from 2024**

JGG – 30.06.2023

The [periodic program evaluation](https://www.sv.uio.no/iss/om/organisasjon/programradene/samfunnsgeografi/moter/2022/september/saksdokumenter/rapport_samfunnsgeografi_uio_forelopig.pdf) of the human geography programmes was conducted V22. Concerning the master's programme, the committee suggested to reconsider the current model with four specialisations, as it implied reduced flexibility (fixed course combinations) and a tension between the number of specialisations, courses offered and teaching resources available in the programme.

The issue has been discussed in several Program Council meetings (October, November, December 2022, February 2023). A one-day workshop for permanent staff members was convened on June 2 to discuss the direction of the revision process and different options. This discussion note summarizes the key considerations and alternatives raised by the staff, identifying specific questions that need to be discussed and decided upon by the programme council.

**Goals for the revision process identified by staff:**

* Flexibility of content
* Flexibility for staff
* Closer to research
* Timely/current issues
* Disciplinary diversity

Our current portfolio builds on the need to provide core courses for each of the four specializations. Some courses have served several specializations, but most of them only one. The planned move away from specializations from H24 gives us the opportunity to revise the course portfolio in a manner that is more in tune with the goals identified by the staff.

It became clear during the workshop that the staff experiences an increased distance between teaching and research at the master level. While this can be expected to a certain extent at the bachelor level, where basic competencies are established, it does not need to apply for master level courses. A teaching portfolio that is less generic and closer to research seems to be a desirable option. The following aspects need to be taken into consideration:

* Student experience: academic interests and preferences, work-life relevance
* Predictability: semester schedules, planning for 2-years
* Timeregnskap

**Programme structure and alternative models**

The HGO programme takes up to 26 new students each Autumn. Besides the introductory course HGO4011 and two methods courses, the current portfolio includes 10 HGO-thematic courses (HGO4040 and SOSGEO-courses not included). Thematic courses are offered every other year, 4 in Autumn, 1 in Spring. This means that every autumn semester, we teach 5 courses in the master programme. This is a high number of courses compared both to the number of programme students and permanent HGO staff available. Given that new students cannot take more than 2 thematic courses the first semester, our courses compete for a very limited number of students.

Autumn courses are relatively well attended, both by programme students and from other programmes, with variation among courses. Participation in thematic courses in Spring varies greatly. Our current programme structure includes methods and starting thesis work in the 2nd semester, leaving only 10sps left for course work the same semester for 60sp thesis. Students taking a 30sp thesis have 10sp more to fill in.

*About the first 10sp of the 60sp-master thesis on 2nd semester:* All students (both 4090 and 4080) have to prepare a concept note which is used to assign them a supervisor. For those writing a 60sp thesis, could we put more activities into the 2nd semester? For example, built in HGO4040 into HGO4090, so that students really get into building up a literature review for their theses. Currently HGO4040 is optional and taken by 4-9 students each semester. Supervisors advice on building the lists and develop the exam questions, but do not see the exam paper. If built into HGO4090, the paper could go as a compulsory activity, not as an exam, and students could use the text as part of their theory chapters. The advantage would be to get students writing. As for students taking HGO4080, HGO4040 could be made compulsory, either in the 2nd or 3rd semester.

*Optimal size of course portfolio:* The current portfolio of thematic courses is relatively large compared to the number of students and staff in the programme, although not necessarily to the breadth of HGO as a discipline. What is to be considered an optimal size for the portfolio can vary according to different criteria.

* In terms of effective use of resources (teaching time), an optimal portfolio would include 6 thematic courses offered every other Autumn (3-3 model), alternatively 7 courses (3-4). This model would allow predictability for students, as they would have access to all courses within the duration of the programme (2 years).
* In terms of the research interests of the staff, an optimal portfolio would not be limited in number of courses. Courses could be designed, prepared and offered at a certain point in time (á-la-carte-model). The issue of frequency within a 2-year horizon still remains: how often would courses run and which criteria apply for scheduling courses.

*Smaller courses – 5sp:* The issue was raised on whether smaller thematic courses could be developed to respond to staff and students interest for more specialized topics, also in tune with the staff’s own research. Inputs in terms of admin resources remains about the same either it is 5 or 30 study points, but the academic work involved can be reduced. 5sp could provide thematic diversity in an otherwise more stable portfolio. This option deserves more consideration.

*Work-life component:* Work-life relevance in study programmes is an important dimension to take into consideration in revising the course portfolio. Beyond our efforts to bring this up through teaching activities and curricula, earlier discussions at the programme council considered the option to develop an internship course based on the experience with HGO4203, which has a very popular internship component for HGO-students only. The new course, “HGO Internship”, is under design and a draft course description will be circulated for comments before the scheduled programme council meeting on September 13. The aim is to offer the new course from V24. HGO Internship will be open only for HGO students and internship places will be recruited from a broader range of work places and activities. Suggestions for new places are needed and most welcome.

**Sub-disciplinary presence in thematic portfolio and semester distribution**

The current portfolio responds to the need for core courses in the 4 specialisations. An overview of distribution of students along the different spesialisations is presented in the table below, based on student registration during the first semester. Changes at a later stage are common, thus the number of students in General HGO is higher than registered by the time students graduate.

*Number of students registered in HGO specializations since H17*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | General HGO | Urban geo | Climate change | Devp & politics | Economic & labour | Antall studievalg |
| 2017 | 3 | 11 | 6 | 3 | 1 | 24 |
| 2018 | 4 | 10 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 24 |
| 2019 | 9 | 8 | 5 | 4 | 0 | 26 |
| 2020 | 8 | 9 | 5 | 4 | 0 | 26 |
| 2021 | 6 | 6 | 2 | 6 | 1 | 21 |
| 2022 | 4 | 9 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 17 |
| Sum | 34 | 53 | 23 | 21 | 7 | 138 |
| % | 24,6 | 38,4 | 16,7 | 15,2 | 5,1 | 100 |

Urban geography continues to be the subdiscipline with larger number of students, followed by climate & environment and development & politics. A revised course portfolio should take our student base into consideration with respect to number and frequency of courses offered.

Another important consideration is the strategic decision opted by our programme to highlight the relevance of our discipline in social and environmental sustainability debates and practice.

Based on these two considerations, either we choose a 3-3/3-4 model or á-la-carte model (or any other model), thematic courses offered every Autumn semester ought to include 1 urban geography course AND 1 climate/environment course.

**Courses we would like to teach**

If we were to remake our portfolio, what course would you like to teach? Based on this question, the following 10 titles came up, some as new courses, others as merging existing into more generic ones:

* Decolonial and political ecologies (Andrea)
* Geographies of media and communication (Michael)
* Economic geography: Agency, institutions and industrial evolution (Sverre)
* Frictions of urban sustainability (Per Gunnar)
* Geopolitical economy, working life and precariety (Hege)
* Unequal cities (Terje, by others)
* The futures of work (David)
* Geographies of conflict (Andreas)
* Politics and society (Kristian)
* Social transformation and global environmental change (Bjørnar)

**Specific issues for the programme council**

This note has tried to systematize the discussions we had at workshop to come one step further in the revision of the HGO course portfolio. It is not ‘Minutes of the meeting’ and a number of items have not been included. The following questions need to be addressed by the programme council the next semester(s):

1. Thematic courses at master level should reflect/be closer to the staff’s fields of research.
2. Thematic courses to be offered ONLY in Autumn semester, every other year (independent of which model we choose).
3. Independent of number of thematic courses offered every Autumn, 1 urban geography course AND 1 climate/environment course should always be included (unless due to sickness or sabbatical).
4. HGO Internship to be offered as elective course every year in Spring semester, for programme students only.
5. Selecting a model for course portfolio: 3-3/3-4, á-la-carte, other.
6. Timeline for thematic courses available from H24 onwards.

Look forward to a productive discussion!