# Response to the Periodic Evaluation Committee Report

As requested by the Faculty of Social Sciences PECOS has been subjected to a periodic evaluation by a committee consisting of Nina Borgen, Robin Espeland, Håvard M. Nygård and Bjørn Stensaker (chair). The previous external evaluation was conducted in 2015.

The [evaluation report](https://www.uio.no/english/studies/programmes/peace-master/quality-assurance/pecos-periodic-evaluation-report-2021.pdf) highlights the distinct qualities and potential of this program, and raises important questions for the ongoing process to develop this program further. This evaluation was made at a time when the program is in the process of a broader renewal in terms of its profile and substance. The evaluation report strongly supports these plans (p. 8) and states that the program “could be very important in the future profiling of the Department of Political Science” (p. 3).

This note responds to the suggestions made in this report and points to next steps in responding to these. Some of the proposals and observations have already been addressed, whereas certain other suggestions require resources beyond what the program and Department of Political Science currently possess.

The evaluation report (10 pages) addresses the following main areas:

1. Management and organization
2. Recruitment and admissions
3. Learning outcomes and academic profile
4. Program structure
5. Teaching methods and student learning
6. Examination methods, results and study progress
7. Conclusions and recommendations

This report responds to points made under each cluster sequentially.

1. Management and organization

The PECOS program´s current profile highlights the combination of rigorous methods grounded in political science with practitioner perspectives as a defining feature. This is a small program which presupposes active participation by all students.

The report notes that “the program does seem to have a challenge clearly formulating expectations to the students at PECOS” (p. 3). The program leadership has adopted a number of measures since January 2021 to communicate the profile of this program to an external audience as well as clarifying expectations to students within the program. For example, the leadership has created a PECOS Handbook and updated the program website to more clearly communicate the goals and defining features of this program. The Program Director prepared a communication strategy in the spring to enable more systematic external communication (this point will be elaborated under point 7 item VII below).

The evaluation report points out that much of this has taken the form of “tacit knowledge” rather than explicit communication (p. 3). Changing this has been a key priority in 2021. The program leadership has since January 2021 developed both substance and format when it comes to communicating expectations to students. In terms of substance, a key priority for the Program leadership is to build a culture of active participation and to further define the program´s distinctive features for internal and external audiences. The PECOS student handbook specifies what the student experience in the program entails. The expectations regarding active participation are communicated to the students in the annual start-up meeting as well as throughout the year (via meetings, messages in Canvas, and by noting attendance in the new Practitioner Perspectives Seminar). This work is ongoing, and is carried out in close coordination with the PECOS Student Council.

1. Recruitment and admissions

The program now has about 800 applications for 20 places per year. The number of international students admitted to the program remains relatively low compared with the Norwegian students. While the current routines for admissions are adequate, the program will further develop these routines as part of our ongoing efforts to enhance the quality of the program.

1. Learning outcomes and academic profile

As the report notes, the PECOS program has in recent years strengthened its profile as a program founded on political science methods. It is currently in the process of expanding and developing its methods classes, which is a defining feature of the PECOS program and sets it apart from similar program at other institutions (e.g. the Hertie School, Yale, and the Blavatnik School). The evaluation report highlights that the learning outcomes can be further developed and specified. These suggestions are consistent with the ongoing effort to enhance the profile of the program. The newly created PECOS Teaching Cluster is a new informal forum where the faculty can discuss and coordinate regarding such issues.

1. Program structure

The evaluation report commends that the PECOS program now places greater emphasis on methods and transferable skills. The revised program applies methods training and the MA thesis in a structured manner in the course of the two years of the program. At the same time, the report highlights the need for a clearer “red thread”. As such, the evaluation report´s comment that this revised program structure suits the learning objectives of the program (p. 4) indicates that these efforts are moving in a good direction. The ongoing reform proposal is intended to strengthen the “red thread” by making applied methods training a defining feature of the program. The methods classes have an increasingly applied focus, relating to substantive research questions in the field of peace and conflict studies, and are designed to move progressively from fundamental principles to “hands-on” training as students move towards the MA thesis project.

The report contains specific comments regarding individual modules. The design seminar has been completely overhauled for the fall seminar to provide more specific advice, guidance and tools for applying research design principles to the MA thesis proposals. These changes address the concerns raised in the report regarding the purpose and format of this class.

The report also highlights PECOS4110 as a successful and popular course due to its applied approach and use of simulations. This course will resume as an optional course when the convenor returns from research leave. The new class replacing this class (PECOS 4111 Conflict and Cooperation) contains similar components (e.g. a simulation) and an applied approach. Popular classes will occasionally be paused or revised as faculty members have research leaves or sabbaticals. It is also important that the program develops new substantive courses focusing on issues that have received less attention (e.g. international security and interstate conflict) in this program. This is part of the PECOS program´s applied approach to the full range of the peace and conflict field.

1. Teaching methods and student learning

The report states that the majority of classes adopt a traditional approach to evaluation and teaching in the form of lectures and seminars. Currently, the design seminar and the proposed changes to this seminar following the methods reform adopts an interactive format with discussions and exercises, along with hands-on training. Similarly, the PECOS4111 class includes exercises such as structured class discussion and plans for a simulation of a nuclear crisis. The program will continue to explore options for interactive formats (both digital and physical) for teaching in coordination with the MA Statsvitenskap program. At this stage in the pandemic, all PECOS classes include a physical and a digital alternative for the students.

The evaluation report highlights the internship option within the program as an a valuable component. It states that “it is also a problem that many international students – even though all students are eligible for it - are not exposed to the opportunities of the internship model” (p. 7). The program leadership has not found evidence of unequal success rates between Norwegian and international students in taking advantage of this option. Ensuring an equitable set of internship opportunities is an essential objective for PECOS, and this goal guides the effort to develop new agreements with institutions for such internship opportunities. We list such opportunities on Canvas where all students in the program can access them. But it is important to point out that as the host institutions themselves select candidates for internships from the pool of applications. Should indications of a systematic bias in the internship module emerge in the future, this would raise serious questions about the inclusion of an optional internship component in the program.

The optional internship course was overhauled in the spring, by opening for PECOS students conducting research assistance as well as other practical tasks as part of their internship experiences. The report has been shortened and made more focused on development of new skills and how this experience contributed toward the more general learning objectives for PECOS.

1. Examination methods and study progress

The report notes that the students in this program bring an impressive range of skills and perspectives that is a resource that could be further applied in the teaching activities. There are several areas where the teaching activities build in interactive features such as structured discussions and peer review (e.g. in the renewed research design course and in PECOS 4111).

The evaluation also states that “much of the examination format in PECOS is quite traditional where “school-type written exams” dominate” (p. 7) and that this is not consistent with the stated learning objectives of the program (which include skills such as providing constructive feedback). But in the current program there is only one course that has an examination in this mold, whereas three courses (PECOS4021, PECOS4010, and PECOS4022) have a combination of examination and term papers and one course (PECOS4111) has two essays as the basis for assessment. The research design module´s obligatory activities include presenting and providing peer feedback, which is consistent with the stated learning objectives of the program.

The students in this program tend to receive strong academic results. The evaluation report points out that the completion rate has not improved in recent years (p. 7), and several possible causes are listed (including extracurricular work). This is an area of concern for the Program leadership. For this reason, there is an increased emphasis on active participation and in setting up the research design seminar as a launching board for the second year´s working on the MA thesis project. It is important to ensure that the students remain active members of the program in the second year as they work on their MA thesis projects. The program leadership is developing a more structured format for interim progress reports in November and March to ensure that any problems or delays are identified in a timely manner.

The PECOS leadership has tried to develop an alumni network, as this would be a great resource for the program itself and the students. We are awaiting advice from the Faculty on this matter (requested spring 2021).

1. Conclusions and recommendations

The final section of the report includes several specific suggestions (pp. 7-10) drawing on the comments and observations in the previous sections. Below, the responses to these specific recommendations are listed. In most cases, these issues are addressed in the ongoing methods reform and efforts initiated by the program leadership in the spring of 2021.

1. Emphasizing excellence in the learning outcomes

This recommendation will be taken into consideration as the program´s overall and individual core course learning objectives are revised and updated.

1. Clarify expectations to students

This is an area of ongoing efforts and an important priority. We are working along several tracks to address the internal and external communication of the program´s features and expectations.

1. The “red thread” in the PECOS program

The applied, expanded and integrated approach to methods teaching as recommended in the reform proposal serves to strengthen the “red thread” in the PECOS program. Furthermore, the steps taken to strengthen the “participation culture” among the students and integrating the MA thesis writing more into the taught activities in the second year (see point X below) will contribute toward this objective.

1. Canvas and digital design

The program leadership works in coordination with the Director of the MA Statsvitenskap in developing and enhancing digital tools for teaching and communication within our existing resources.

1. Interactive formats for learning and evaluation

The existing plans for courses in PECOS include simulations, structured discussions and interactive teaching formats. The PECOS teaching cluster provides a forum for discussing further options for developing such formats moving forward. At the same time, it is important that each course convenor has sufficient flexibility in tailoring the teaching and examination activities to suit the content of each individual course.

1. Practitioner perspectives seminar initiative

This new initiative has been met with considerable enthusiasm by the students. While making attendance compulsory might be an option, there is value in having a sufficiently strong culture of participation to not make this a compulsory activity. Students have requested these kinds of initiatives, and are enrolled in a full-time program. It is reasonable to expect them to show up even if this is not compulsory. The students have been invited to nominate and chair three sessions in this series, which can contribute to build their commitment to this valuable effort.

1. Profiling of PECOS by the Department and University

The evaluation report highlights the value of the Department and University in profiling the PECOS program. The program leadership has taken steps in this direction, but has found this difficult for several different reasons relating to an apparently lack of priority at the Faculty level. For example, in 2021 PECOS relaunched the Oslo Peace and Conflict Lecture as the official opening of the study year, and the Norwegian Chief of Defence gave this lecture. The video recorded featuring his advice to students was not featured centrally on the Departmental website or Faculty website. Instead, it was first placed on a website for employees and later on made available on a separate subpage that is difficult to locate. At the very least this seems like a lost opportunity to feature the program and a very prominent speaker, who was in charge of handling the crisis situation in Afghanistan.

The second issue concerns the use of the program and departmental websites in giving visibility to the PECOS program more broadly. The program leadership has updated the content of the program website, and has made suggestions for further additions of content. For example, there were plans for a promotional video that was put on halt due to COVID. But it should be possible to feature activities, such as the annual Peace and Conflict Lecture and Practitioner Perspectives Seminars where prominent leaders meet the students. The formats for the website is very rigid, and efforts to adapt these to the needs of the program have only been moderately successful. With very few options for editing the content and format of the website, and gatekeeping functions for this being held at the Faculty level, there is a real limit to how the main interface of this program can serve its purpose in promoting and communicating its actual activities.

This raises the question *how* PECOS can be made more visible. The program has launched new activities and a student handbook, but unless its efforts are made visible on the Departmental and University-wide webpages such efforts will have limited impact. The use of Facebook as an alternative interface to reach students is suboptimal for several reasons, including the declining number of students who use Facebook. Social media should not be considered as an alternative to promoting such activities on the website.

The Program leadership welcomes advice and suggestions from the Departmental and Faculty leadership for how this situation can be improved moving forward.

1. Renovation and study space for PECOS

The report raises pertinent questions about how the PECOS students are affected by the lingering pandemic and renovation, which will likely in total last about four years. Unfortunately, less has been done to ensure minimal disruption to the PECOS students than has been possible. The Faculty has received suggestions such as finding a temporary study space to replace the student lounge, but these have not been answered. The program leadership has voiced concerns to the Departmental leadership and committee overseeing the renovation and moving process on this matter, but has not received specific feedback.

The PECOS student representatives have been very active in asking similar questions, but have received few specific answers beyond being advised to coordinate their bookings for study desks. Overall, it has been difficult to get timely information for both staff and students.

On 31 August the Faculty announced that there are delays in the renovation process, which means this situation will adversely affect students for a longer period than envisioned. This underscores the need to find better solutions for the students in the interim period.

This situation gives cause for serious concern for how the lack of compensatory action (such as finding a dedicated study space or lounge area during the renovation period) will affect the student´s learning environment and the PECOS program more broadly over the next few years. While the program leadership has attempted to create new forums to ensure there are some areas of interaction (e.g. the Practitioner Perspectives Seminar) this cannot compensate for the erosive effects the renovation and pandemic combined have had on the learning environment and community spirit in the student body.

The Program Leadership welcomes initiatives from the Faculty to ensure that the students receive adequate shared study space during the renovation period.

1. Attracting qualified students from the Middle East, Africa and Southern Asia

The PECOS program´s profile highlights advanced political science methods. For this reason, it is important to maintain entrance requirements including prior knowledge of political science methods. There are two specific measures that can be considered that might increase the pool of competitive candidates from underrepresented geographical areas. First, the Department could create a digital or hybrid “crash course” in research methods that prospective applicants can take to qualify for admission. Second, the program leadership examines its admission procedures to ensure that these are not overly rigid. The program leadership shares the goal of increasing the relatively small number of international admissions moving forward.

1. MA thesis supervision, design seminar and study progression

The evaluation report highlights weaknesses with the existing follow-up regarding MA thesis. The program leadership has taken several steps to amend this (by recruiting a larger number of internal advisors, clarifying expectations, developing a new design seminar beginning in the fall of 2021, and adding more follow-up procedures to track student progress). We will also explore additional measures in coordination with the MA Statsvitenskap.