

To: Department of Political Science and College of Social Sciences, University of Oslo
From: Michael Alvarez, Associate Professor, Department of Comparative Politics, University of Bergen
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Subject: Evaluation of Grade Challenge Procedures (*Tilsyns sensorrapport*)

In this document, I will present a brief description and evaluation of the process related to grade challenges at the Department of Political Science (and associated programs) at the University of Oslo.

As my assignment letter (dated 3 November 2009) states, my task is the following:

”Vi ber om at du skriver en kort rapport på grunnlag av dine egne erfaringer som medlem av klagekommisjonen på bacheloremnene tilbudt ved instituttet, samt det vedlagte materialet... Rapporten skal omtale både eksamensresultatene, sensuren og klageprosessen.”

Volume of Challenges per Semester

The grade challenge commission receives a set of examinations following each academic semester. We receive between 45 and 80 examinations per semester.

Examinations and *Sensorveiledninger*

Across the range of courses, I have found the examinations to be very effective: they are at the appropriate level of difficulty (challenging, yet fair), each respective exam generally includes a range of questions which covers a good selection of the course syllabus, the exams present a variety of *types* of questions (for example, short-answer questions as well as more extended essay questions), and they take the students seriously. They present rigorous, serious problems that demand careful and serious preparation on the part of the students. One can, on the basis of these exams, state that students must *learn* in this department or they will simply not perform. In short, to receive an A or B grade from this department is a mark of distinction.

I have always found the grader guidelines (*sensorveiledninger*) to be remarkably thorough and detailed. They identify the topics, readings, and content which are necessary for good performance. In those cases where specific problem-solving is required (for example, STV1020/1021), the instructions are exhaustively and clearly detailed, leaving no room for ambiguity.

The remarks above apply *consistently* across the range of courses studied for this report. I was not struck by any particular exams that stood out in terms of level of difficulty and all the exams faithfully reflected the content of the courses.

Quality of Administrative Process

The performance of the administrators at the Department of Political Science has been

exemplary. As external examiner, I am always alerted in advance about forthcoming examinations. The examinations are always sent to me via post, with full documentation, including grade explanation, grounds for challenge, etc. Occasionally, exams are sent to me as scanned documents. There have been occasions when I myself have misplaced an examination, and upon my request, the staff at UiO have scanned and emailed the files immediately. The staff personnel have been fully cooperative, courteous, and professional in their email correspondences with me, and always reply immediately to any inquiries and requests on my part.

In sum, the administrative staff that handles grade challenges has performed at the top level of efficiency, effectiveness, and courtesy.

Quality of Internal Examiners of Challenges

Across recent years, I have worked extensively with the following internal grade challenge examiners at UiO's Department of Political Science: Bjørn Erik Rasch, Hege Skeie, and Tom Christensen. I can state without any qualification that all three internal examiners have been simply outstanding in their professional qualifications and performance. They provide timely, thorough, careful, and very precise evaluations of the examinations, displaying keen and experienced judgment while determining whether or not a given challenge should or should not be granted a grade change. It has been my pleasure and privilege to forge this cooperative and rewarding professional relationship.

Type of Grade Challenged

My educated guess is that approximately 70% of the grades that are challenged received an original grade of C or D, predominantly C. This comes as little surprise, as many students have an interpretation of what constitutes a "good" performance (the definition of a C grade) that differs from the professional examiners. A similar explanation applies to differing interpretations of what constitutes a D grade. Overall, there is nothing surprising or disturbing about the patterns of grade challenges that are forthcoming from students.

Grounds for Student Grade Challenges and their Merits

Unfortunately, approximately 20% of the students explain their challenges in the following manner: "I disagree with the grade," or "I think that the examiners were too strict in their judgment." On the other hand, the large majority of students are relatively careful and thoughtful in explaining the grounds for their complaint and in identifying with varying degrees of precision the specific elements of the grade explanation that they disagree with.

Having said the above, my professional judgment is that approximately 30% of the complaints are not warranted. What I mean by this is that my expectation is that for about 30% of the challenges, a panel of examiners would reach unanimous consensus on the accuracy and correctness of the original grade. Hence, about 30% of the complaints reflect a student "gambling" on a "better" decision by the challenge

commission, or, more commonly, a clear misunderstanding by the student regarding what type of performance constitutes a C or D grade.

Nonetheless, there are a fair number of complaints that appear to be somewhat motivated by encouraging remarks contained in the grade explanation itself, which brings me to my next point.

Quality of Grade Explanations

There is a significant degree of variability in the quality of the grade explanations provided by the respective scientific staff. This is the area of most concern to me and which I suggest be granted some serious consideration by the Department of Political Science.

The least informative and helpful grade explanations are those which do little more than cut and paste the official definition of the grade given. Such an explanation does nothing to clarify the reasons for why *the given examination itself merited that grade*. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for grade explanations to be delivered very late, several weeks after the student's request. Most commonly, the examiner begins with a statement like, "I apologize for the late reply; I have been out of the country." Unfortunately, such explanations often ring unpersuasively. My sense is that two weeks is more than sufficient time for an examiner to prepare a brief, yet sufficient grade explanation, and that in the future, the instructions sent to examiners should stress the importance of punctuality. The lack of punctuality not only inconveniences and concerns the student, it throws sand into the gears of the departmental machinery, causing last-minute scanning, faxing, and emailing of examinations that should have been sent to the challenge commission days or even weeks earlier, creating unnecessary inconveniences for the administrative staff.

The large majority of grade explanations consist of one paragraph of explanation, with varying degrees of detail. These explanations help, but I myself find most of them to be inadequate. In my view, given the rigour and detail that characterizes the high quality examinations at UiO, a brief one-paragraph grade explanation is insufficient, and unfortunately gives the impression that the examiner simply cannot be bothered to take the time that s/he is obligated to devote to a satisfactory grade explanation.

My suggestion is that examiners be provided with forceful encouragement to devote a sufficient amount of time to writing grade explanations that thoroughly present all the details relevant for a clear understanding of how the grade was determined. Such explanations have two purposes: (1) to adequately serve the student, who is entitled to a thorough and detailed explanation; (2) to persuade the student about the justification of the grade, and thus discourage a potentially fruitless, unnecessary formal challenge.

One pattern that was more common in the past than the present (although I still encounter it regularly) is the following: the grader writes that the student's performance was "a high C" or that it "just missed reaching a B" or that it was a "borderline" case. I strongly discourage the use of such language, as it serves to encourage a student grade

challenge.

My suggestion is that the grader's explanation should do the following: present the formal definition of the grade; show, with detail and example, how and why the exam in question satisfied these criteria and failed to reach a higher grade (providing a question-by-question overview); avoid saying whether the grade was a "high" or "low" version of the C or D or whatever.

My belief is that better grade explanations will more effectively serve student needs and reduce the frequency of grade challenges. Again, I strongly encourage the Department of Political Science to implement revised procedures and instructions intended to improve this aspect of the grade challenge process.

Number of Grades Altered

My experience is that the vast majority of grades that are administered are accurate and well-grounded, which reflects very positively upon the professional qualifications of the scientific staff. There are, of course, occasions where for one reason or another, the entire distribution for a given course commission appears to be slanted too far to the left or to the right. Consequently, there are occasions where the challenge commission finds itself altering several grades from one particularly original commission. But such occasions are rare.

At the same time, the challenge commission *does* regularly change the original grade. My estimate is that across semesters in recent years, the original grade is raised one grade higher in approximately 15% to 22% of the cases (the fall semester 2009 rate was $16/80 = 20\%$) and that the original grade is lowered in approximately 2% to 8% of the cases (the fall semester 2009 rate was $4/80 = 5\%$).

Challenges of Master Thesis Grades

Challenges to masters thesis decisions arise periodically throughout the academic year. My educated guess is that I read approximately six to eight such challenges per academic year. In such cases, the challenge is usually understandable; in other words, one can understand the grounds upon which a given student would deem it worthwhile and justified to challenge a grade. Having said this, I do not mean to imply that the challenge is merited: in fact, the rate at which the grade challenge commission alters original master thesis grades is very low, at approximately 5%.

As a matter of procedure, following a decision to consider changing the original thesis grade, an oral examination is scheduled and undertaken. I myself have not seen any particular value in retaining such a procedure. Almost universally, the student's performance on the oral examination substantiates the verdict based upon the written submission. Sometimes the student performs slightly sub-par, but never has it occurred that the student performs so poorly as to compel the commission to reverse its original inclination and retain the original grade after all. I therefore question whether an oral examination should be retained as a matter of procedure in the event of a change to the

original master thesis grade.

Conclusions

In sum, I am happy to report a string of positive conclusions regarding the organization, administration, and performance of the procedures and personnel that constitute the grade challenge system at UiO's Department of Political Science. At the same time, I urge the department to consider implementing the procedural revisions suggested above.