

Evaluation report concerning the PhD programme at the Department of Political Science 2022

Introduction

This evaluation report is based on two main sources. The first comprises the progress reports from students and supervisors in the fall of 2021. The second consists of a survey specifically designed for the purposes of this evaluation report. This survey was sent to all students enrolled on the political science PhD programme in November 2021. 33 students submitted the progress report. Regrettably, however, despite two reminders, only 15 students (less than a third of all students on the programme) answered the survey. Moreover, most of those who answered the survey are relatively new on the programme, meaning that they had not yet completed compulsory parts such as the midway assessment or the trial defense. A few respondents had not yet even completed the design seminar. The low response rate might be an indication that the students find the relatively frequent reports and surveys exhausting. One should bear in mind that the survey designed for this evaluation report was issued shortly after the yearly progress report (to which 33 students responded).

Size and activities

By the end of 2021, 56 students were enrolled in the PhD programme in Political Science. Courses that have been offered the last three years include STV9040 Design seminar (every semester), STV9050 Midway assessment (every semester), STV9060 Trial defense (every semester), STV9020G Rational Choice in Empirical Political Science (spring 2019), STV9020B Statistical Analysis (fall 2019), STV9028 The Methodology of Political Theory (fall 2019), STV9430 Political Leadership and Democratic Innovations in Local Government (fall 2019), STV9431 A Differentiated Europe and its Implications (spring 2021).

Part I: Courses

Course relevance

13 of the 15 respondents to the survey characterize the teaching component of the PhD program as “adequate”. While very few students report that they have problems finding relevant methods courses, several students state that they have problems finding relevant theory courses. Of the 15 students who answered the survey, 10 stated that it is “somewhat difficult” or “very difficult” to find relevant theory courses. In contrast, the corresponding number for methods courses was zero. These results reflect a persistent problem regarding theory courses; hence, they do not come as a surprise. Political science is a rather heterogeneous discipline, meaning that our PhD students’ projects differ widely both concerning empirical topics and regarding the choice of theoretical approach. In the survey, we encouraged the students to propose a topic for a theory course that they expected to attract at least 4-5 participants. The five proposals we received varied significantly; however, three

of them mentioned peace, conflict, or war – concepts that were also mentioned by two or three students in their progress report. We will therefore try to organize a theory course related to these topics in 2022 or 2023. More generally, we will continue to try to alleviate the problem, including by discussing the matter in the new annual meetings between the department and all PhD students on the programme (the first meeting of this type will be held in the spring of 2022).

Design Seminar

12 of the 15 respondents to the survey had completed the design seminar. Three reported to be somewhat satisfied, seven were “neither satisfied nor dissatisfied”, while two stated they were “somewhat dissatisfied”. According to Staffan Kumlin, leader of the design seminar in the last 5 years, use of Zoom (due to the pandemic) has adversely influenced students’ satisfaction with the seminar. The purpose of the seminar is not only to provide scholarly advice but also to bring the students in contact with each other and with representatives of the department. At least for the latter two purposes, digital meetings obviously cannot fully substitute for in-person seminars. A challenge concerning the design seminar is the recent sharp increase in PhD students on the programme. While the number of students on the design seminar was typically 4-5 until recently, 13 students enlisted for the design seminar in January 2022. The main reason for the increase is the sharp increase in externally funded projects at ISV, which has entailed a corresponding increase in the number of PhD fellowships (as well as post docs). A consequence of this development is that the PhD programme will require more resources in the years to come. The students participating in January 2022 expressed satisfaction with the design seminar, although some also pointed out that the course description deviated somewhat from the way the seminar was organized in practice. This deviation has now been corrected.

Midway assessment

Five of the 15 students who answered the survey had completed the midway assessment. Two characterized it as “very unhelpful”, while the remaining three said it was “neither helpful nor unhelpful”. These rather discouraging results provide reason for rethinking the format of the midway assessment. Several students have also informally signaled that they feared the midway assessment before they completed it. On the other hand, several others have said after completing the assessment that there was nothing to fear. One should also bear in mind that the midway assessment is intended to serve as a checkpoint that the student concerned is on schedule to completing the PhD on time. It is therefore reasonable to expect that students with a somewhat slow progress do not find the midway assessment an entirely pleasant experience.

Trial defense

Only three of the 15 students who answered the survey had completed the trial defense. Of these three, one was “very satisfied”, one was “neither satisfied nor dissatisfied”, and one was “somewhat dissatisfied”. When asked immediately after their trial defense, practically all students answer that they prefer the current colloquium-like format over a format more closely resembling an actual defense. The overall impression is that the current format of the trial defense works reasonably well.

Part II: Thesis work

Student throughput

In the last three years, 37 students were enrolled in the PhD programme in Political Science. 36 of these are still active. The department has had 24 doctoral defenses in this period. The average time spent for these candidates is 6,2 years. 16 completed their thesis within 6 years, 8 candidates spent more than 6 years.

2019: 12 doctoral defenses, with average time spent 5,7 years.

2020: 8 doctoral defenses, with average time spent 5,7 years.

2021: 4 doctoral defenses, with average time spent 7,3 years.

These numbers do not take into consideration the reasons for the delay. The department intends to conduct a more detailed investigation of how much of the extra time spent is due to sick leave or parental leave.

Course relevance

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Support from supervisors

10 of the 15 respondents said they are “somewhat satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the support offered by their supervisors. One student reported being “very dissatisfied”. Three students and two supervisors requested follow-up meetings in their progress reports. These follow-up meetings entailed replacement of one supervisor, who had been inactive for the last year or so (despite submitting the progress report).

A total of 180 working hours is the guiding norm for PhD supervision. The supervision is distributed between the main and a second supervisor by agreement between the student, the supervisors, and the department. The faculty offers a PhD supervisor course. Most supervisors are content with the follow-up from the department, but a few have expressed a desire for more contact with other supervisors for the benefit of exchange of experiences.

Support from home institution

The vast majority of the students seem reasonably satisfied with the support offered by their home institution; however, two report being “somewhat dissatisfied” and one student has informally informed the department that she feels more or less left alone both by her project leader (who is not her supervisor) and by her host institution.

Overall satisfaction with the programme

Despite somewhat varying satisfaction with the individual components of the PhD programme in political science, the overall satisfaction with the program appears to be reasonably good. Indeed, 13 of the 15 respondents to the survey report being “somewhat satisfied” (9) or “very satisfied” (4) with the programme. Moreover, no student reports being “very dissatisfied”. It is also reassuring that two thirds (9 of the 15 respondents) characterize the design seminar, the midway assessment and the trial defense combined as either “helpful” or “very helpful” for ensuring progress in their PhD work.

Conclusion and focal points for improvement

Although the PhD programme in political science works reasonably well, this evaluation has highlighted a few weaknesses and focal points for improvement. In 2022, we will particularly emphasize the following tasks:

- Rethink the format of the midway assessment
- Organize a theory course in peace and conflict or related issues
- Collect suggestions for improvement of all elements of the PhD programme from enrolled students