Draft report STVMA Part 1 - Development of the Master's Program in Political Science

1. Introduction and Mandate

On June 24th, 2025, the board adopted a strategy for the development of the department's master's programs. A working group was established to implement this strategy for the disciplinary program (STVMA).

The mandate involves:

- **Specialization:** Examining whether and how to highlight the possibilities for specialization within the main areas, particularly considering recruitment to the program.
- **Periodic Evaluation:** Considering changes in light of the periodic program evaluation.
- **Recruitment:** Addressing measures to improve recruitment and completion rates.

Primary constraints:

- **Structure:** STVMA and PECOS should maintain a relatively similar structure and a joint program council.
- **Resources:** Proposals must account for teaching resources currently under pressure.
- **Future Hiring:** Changes must not unnecessarily create constraints on future hiring decisions or academic flexibility.

Given the broad scope of the mandate, the working group divided the topics into two phases. Topics related to specialisation together with recruitment could be addressed during fall, while issues concerning completion and dropout rates could be handled in the spring semester.

2. Strategic Assessment: The Case for Specialization

The working group has debated whether STVMA should remain a purely generalist program or move toward more "intentional trajectories." While the program is currently successful, there are several arguments for a proactive approach.

Potential Benefits of Specialization:

- **Cohesion and Depth:** Instead of offering students a "patchwork" of elective courses, specializations would create cohesive trajectories. This ensures deeper subfield learning and allows for better alignment of learning outcomes. Students will be better prepared for their master's thesis because they will have a solid foundation in their chosen area.
- **Identity and Recruitment:** A clearer profile can attract new groups of students who currently choose similar programs abroad or elsewhere in Norway. It strengthens the subfield identity and provides students with a heightened sense of direction.
- **Market Signaling:** It allows students to present themselves as "specialists" to employers through a transcript or degree supplement, providing a professional "hook".
- **Competitive Advantage:** As the only Norwegian department covering the entire discipline from BA to PhD, introducing specializations allows the program to reflect the full breadth of faculty expertise and solidify recent expansions in subdisciplines.

Risks and Considerations:

- **Breadth vs. Niche:** A program known for generalist training might lose its trademark or clarity if too many niche tracks are introduced, potentially fragmenting the breadth of the discipline. This might also indicate more segmentation among student groups and labour market entrants, which would be a problematic outcome.
- **Early Commitment:** Specializations – especially if introduced early – can reduce students' freedom to explore different subfields and force them to choose "strategically" rather than based on interest.
- **Current Success:** STVMA is already a successful, well-organized program with high application numbers from talented students. Study barometer and interviews conducted as part of the evaluation also show that students are academically engaged and very satisfied with the program Any change must weigh potential benefits against the risk of disrupting a model that currently performs well.

3. Models for Specialization and Resource Management: What type of specialization do we want/need?

We have assessed three models.

Model	Description	Resources and Constraints
A. Formal Specialization	Students select a fixed track at the start of the degree with several mandatory courses (e.g., the "Copenhagen model").	Allowing our candidates to highlight the specialization whenever this is deemed conducive. Requires guaranteed course offerings in all subfields, making the program vulnerable to staff turnover and sabbaticals.
B. Semi-formal	Course clusters rather than defined tracks - specialization is achieved by completing two electives (20 ECTS) and the MA thesis within the same subfield.	Allows students to explore and discover their interests before committing. Offers flexibility, but might tie resources to specific course offerings.
C. "Light" Specialization (Recommended)	No formal tracks. More explicit descriptions of subfields, as well as guidance for students on how they can frame their course choices and thesis topic as a coherent "competence-package".	Entails very little cost but might reduce the credibility of specialization claims and rules without a formal diploma supplement.

Evaluation: In case specializations would be introduced in the program, the working group recommends Model C ("Light" Specialization). It strikes a balance between branding, flexibility and the resources available. Develop clearer descriptions of the program's subfields and provide guidance on how students can combine courses and thesis work into a coherent "competence package". This would allow students to build and signal a recognizable specialization within the master's program, making their expertise more transparent to employers and academic audiences while strengthening the overall attractiveness of the degree. A possible addition, and acknowledging that the working group has not been able to assess all the potential implications, would be to consider introducing a

diploma supplement documenting the specialization. If this can be done without significant additional costs, it could strengthen the credibility of the “light specialization”-option.

4. Proposal: New Joint Introductory Course

To strengthen the academic core and cohort identity, the working group discussed the possibility of establishing a new mandatory introductory course. This could also contribute to reducing drop-out rates.

- **Structure:** The course would feature a shared component (5–7 lectures) on the role of theory and theorizing in political science, followed by specialized modules where students choose according to their subdiscipline.

  Potential benefits:

- **Academic Foundation:** Reinforces a common intellectual foundation beyond methods and improves research ability.
- **Cohort Identity:** Shared classes and social activities can foster a stronger cohort identity, which is essential for reducing early dropouts.
- **Efficiency:** May yield cost savings if the joint segment is extended and more students align their coursework with their thesis.

  Potential costs:

- **Choice for students:** Many students highly appreciate the possibility to choose elective courses. A new mandatory course would reduce the number of elective courses from four to three
- **Resources:** It would require initial resources for design and implementation.
- **Other groups:** It would mean that the department no longer would offer elective courses in the fall-semester. This would affect other important groups like exchange students and students in the teacher education programme with a social science track.

Our report does not entail a program change. We therefore ask the program council to provide feedback on this first part of the report, after which we will present our conclusion and recommendations to the head of department and the head of teaching. The working group is also in the process of finalizing its discussion on the second part of its mandate that addresses completion rates and drop out, and we will submit the second part of the report to the members of the program in the near future.