Institutional self-assessment: Education

BA-, MA- and PhD programmes in sociology

Department of sociology and human geography,

University of Oslo
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The Department of Sociology and Human Geography at the University of Oslo hosts three disciplinary degree programmes in sociology: BA, MA and PhD. In addition we offer a one year unit (årsevenhet) in sociology. The department is also host to disciplinary programmes in human geography as well as interdisciplinary programmes in culture and communication, development studies and organization, management and work. The academic staff in sociology includes 25 permanently employed professors and associate professors and 13 phd- and 6 post doc fellows on temporary contracts. The general norm is that permanent staff divide their time between teaching and research 50/50, while phd’s and post-docs teach 25%.

1. Organisation and resources
The sociology programmes at UiO benefit from being part of a strong university and vibrant Faculty of Social Sciences. We have a well-developed administrative support system. The scientific staff is offered high quality pedagogical training from the Faculty of Educational Sciences. Our students have access to extensive welfare services, and also to career guidance services both at university and faculty level. And importantly, they are able to choose optional courses from a wide range of disciplinary departments and interdisciplinary programmes of high academic standard.

Our location in the attractive capital city of Oslo is favourable in terms of recruitment of both students and staff. With a range of research institutions and civil service institutions, it constitutes an important job market for social scientists. This also enables us to draw on highly qualified external expertise as guest lecturers, co-supervisors and external examiners.

Sociology is located within a complex department structure which hosts two disciplines as well as several interdisciplinary programmes. This makes management complex, but also offers opportunities for collaboration. In later years we have established several thematic courses in collaboration with human geography, which have been well received by the students.

The size of the university in combination with students’ opportunities to move between different departments when choosing subjects also means that our courses attract many students who are not sociology students. This is primarily an advantage that allows us to maintain a broader repertoire of thematic courses, but it also means that teachers must take into account that students who take the same course may have very different academic background and often no sociology background. Another aspect of the high student numbers is that it can be challenging to create unity among the students, and we therefore devote considerable resources to counteract this.

The department’s economy has been strong in recent years. This means that we have been able to maintain a good level of seminar teaching, use external examiners and offer MA-students extensive individual supervision. However, it is worth noting that the economic surplus relies on a high success rate in attracting externally funded research projects, which again has exempted senior staff members from parts of their teaching duties. On the other hand, many PhD fellows
and post docs have been recruited through external projects, who also contribute to the teaching in a very valuable way. As the department’s disposable funds are estimated to decrease in the years to come, this reliance on external projects will increase. There is a potential tension between allocating senior staff to revenue generating research versus teaching duties.

2. Initial competence
In 2016 we accepted 101 new students into our BA-programme and 50 new students into the MA-programme. The number of applicants who had sociology as their first priority was about twice the number of study places on offer. 9 new students were admitted in the PhD-programme in 2016.

The department has monitored the development in applicant numbers and study progression closely over the years. Similarly to many other social science disciplines, we have observed a reduction in the number of first priority applicants. The number of study places at BA- and MA level has been adjusted to changes in demand in order to maintain a stable quality on the intake of new students. In parallel with reducing the number of BA-places we have increased the number of places on the one year unit. In this way we provide students who are not certain about whether to embark on a full BA-programme an opportunity to “try it out” before either converting to the BA-programme or integrate it into other education or work trajectories.

In order to improve the recruitment to the discipline, a number of measures have been established. We are actively promoting our programmes through social media, and have for example produced several short films where faculty present their research and link this to the study programmes. Graduate students have been engaged in developing a programme for school visits. We participate with engaging lectures by our most popular lecturers in the UiOs “Open Day” event in March every year.

For the students who do enter our study programmes in sociology, we organize a number of activities and events. The entire department organizes a full week of activities at term start for new BA-students. This includes information meetings, informal mini-lectures and a number of get-together social events. New students are divided into groups and allocated to faddere ("buddies") – experienced students who can guide them into student life. This “welcome week” has been very well received among the students.

Also new MA-students are welcomed with an information meeting where we serve lunch before experienced MA-students invite the newcomers to a guided tour of campus and social event in the evening. In 2016 we also established a personal tutor scheme, where all new MA-students were allocated among the scientific staff. The students are encouraged to use their tutor to discuss initial ideas about the MA research, get advice on who to approach for further guidance, as well as advice on their studies and life on campus in general. Finally, we offer our MA-
students a mentoring programme. Participants are allocated to individual mentors, who are all sociology alumni located in various parts of the labour market. We organize 2-3 events for all participants and mentors during the year, and the mentors and mentorees meet individually 3-4 times.

The sociology track of the PhD-programme at the Faculty of social sciences includes approximately 50 PhD-students, where more than half have their work-place at research institutes in the Oslo region. These external PhD-students have been admitted after a review of their education and grades, funding situation (a requirement of 3 years of research funding), the quality of their project proposals, and the supervision situation. Each year the Department advertises 1-2 open 4-year internal PhD-scholarships in sociology, and for 2015 and 2016 the number of applicants has been above 60 each year. We also advertise PhD-scholarships related to externally funded research projects headed by or involving regular faculty. For all PhD-positions, candidates are selected following evaluation of their project proposals, grades and previous work by a scientific committee composed of external and internal members.

3. Programme design
The design of our study programmes date back to the 2003 Quality Reform and the introduction of BA- and MA-degrees in Norway. They have since been revised several times, but the key logic remains, with a combination of introductory subjects (BA), sociological theory, qualitative and quantitative methods, a range of optional thematically orientated courses reflecting the research specialities of faculty, and, finally, individually supervised BA- (since 2010) and MA-theses. In addition, BA students select courses from other study programmes in the shape of a 40-group and so-called free subjects.

Responsibility for the BA- and MA-programmes is located in the programme council for sociology, where the head of studies serves as chair. The programme council is made up of members of the scientific staff with an active involvement in teaching, as well as student representatives. All changes in the programmes are debated and approved by the programme council, and in some cases by the Faculty. The head of studies appoints course convenors for each course, and together they ensure that each course is of good quality and contributes to fulfil the learning outcomes defined in the study plan. We also secure an ongoing dialogue about the study programmes through regular teaching seminars etc.

The Quality Assurance System and its demand and focus on evaluation of programmes and courses helps us ensure that courses are well connected and form a coherent study programme. Student evaluations are performed regularly, both in the shape of half-way evaluations of individual courses and more extensive programme evaluations. Teaching programmes are also regularly externally evaluated, last time in 2015. Extensive committee work has over the past years been conducted both with respect to theory and research methods, resulting in important revisions of the programmes.
The Program Council for PhD, consisting of the heads of research in all the social science disciplines, has the main responsibility for the PhD-programme. It is currently under revision, after an external evaluation in 2016. The sociology track consists of obligatory courses in philosophy of science and in ethics. Students also follow obligatory introductory-, midway- and closing- seminars, where they present their work. The educational part of the programme adds up to 30 ECTS, consisting of both thematic, theoretical and methodological courses. Input to change comes from external evaluation, discussions in the Programme Council, yearly progress reports from PhD-students and supervisors, appraisal interviews, and informal dialogue with the students.

4. Teaching and assessment methods
The teaching in most of our courses are organised as a combination of lectures and seminar groups. Despite this seemingly homogenous outline, there is considerable variation in how individual teachers choose to organize their lectures and seminars. Some teachers have, for example, introduced methods to activate students during lectures through group work and the use of buzzers. In general our impression is that there is a culture for quality in teaching in the department, where staff is positively engaged with teaching and genuinely wants to provide good teaching.

There is limited variation in the assessment methods that are used in the sociology programmes. Conventional 4-6 hours exams, sometimes in combination with a term paper, is by far the most common assessment method. The current leadership at the department has identified this as a target for reform, and an internal committee is currently working on a proposal to introduce more varied assessment methods in the MA-programme, which may also introduce a stronger element of formative assessment during the courses. As we gain experience from this work, we will proceed to the BA-programme. Some changes are also already implemented, for example the introduction of an oral exam to accompany the BA-thesis and provide more extensive feedback on this.

At a structural level there are some incentives in place to encourage a more varied pedagogical practice. The Faculty offers incentives to teachers who want to implement new teaching and assessment methods, and this has for example been applied in recent work to redesign undergraduate courses in quantitative methods. However, time constraints also work to limit incentives towards developing new and more varied pedagogical methods. According to university regulations, the extent of teaching activities is defined through the “work duty account”. This defines a set number of hours for each teaching activity (e.g. 9 hours for 2x45 minutes lecture, 1 hour for marking an exam essay etc), which should add up to 797 hours a year. In practice, it is possible to spend both more and less time on each activity and there is accordingly an implicit incentive towards minimizing change from term to term. Institutionally supported initiatives both at faculty and department level are thus vital to stimulate the development of more varied methods in teaching and assessment. One possibility would be to
redesign the work duty account system to better incorporate incentives for pedagogical development work.

5. Learning environment in study programmes
The department organizes several extracurricular events during the course of the year, and also provides financial support for student- and alumni- driven activities.

The Vilhelm Aubert memorial lectures are given annually by internationally renowned sociologists. Recent invitees include Michele Lamont, Luc Boltanski, Anthony Giddens and Cass Sunstein. In 2016 a number of guest lectures were invited to celebrate the 20 years anniversary of the combined sociology and human geography department. Research groups at the department invite guest lecturers to their seminars, which are open to all. This year we contribute to the celebration of Eilert Sundt’s 200 years anniversary, as well as the honorary doctoral degree awarded to Jon Elster.

However, our experience is that the larger numbers of students tend to prefer more informal and student driven activities. We therefore support the students’ own organizations with funding and infrastructure. The student organizations organize lunch seminars as well as an annual “Sociological Week” which typically include both academic events (where staff often contribute), as well as events that are directed at career planning and social events. We also provide support to the student newspaper Socius, which for many students provide a fruitful platform for developing writing skills.

Finally we support students’ involvement in the wider community of sociologists through offering travel grants to the annual conference of the Norwegian Sociological Association and through support to sosiologen.no, which is an online platform for sociological debate and commentary.

The department started a voluntary monthly PhD-seminar, the so-called Wednesday seminar in 2016. This seminar is meant as a venue where external and internal PhD-candidates meet and discuss their work. The seminar is directed by the heads of research in sociology and human geography, and two PhD-students present papers or paper ideas (with appointed commentators) each month. We work to integrate new students into the seminar and to make it a good venue to present, discuss and build relationships to fellow PhD-students.

6. Educational competence
Our experience is that the stereotype of professors who only teach because they must and give all priority to their research finds little resonance in the reality of our department. Staff are engaged in our study programmes, they want to provide high quality teaching, and they devote considerable time to this task. The high attendance on the department’s teaching seminars
sustains this impression, as do the generally high level of satisfaction that students express with our study programmes through our own course- and programme evaluations.

This said, academic staff also struggle to find a good balance between teaching and research activities. To qualify for permanent positions and professorships, considerable time must be invested in research and publication activities.

The department supports staff members in undertaking pedagogical training. All new employees are required to complete 100 hours of training in university pedagogics within two years of employment, and these hours are deducted from the work duty account. Pedagogical training and teaching experience is also considered a requirement for promotion from associate to full professor. Also internal PhD-fellows are offered pedagogical training, and get this deducted from their work duty account. We also normally fund a fourth year also for externally funded phds/post-docs in order to integrate these members of staff in the department’s teaching activities. In this way we both engage more staff in teaching and support their career development by giving them teaching experience and an understanding for research based teaching. In this sense support for new and temporary staff members’ pedagogical training can be considered good, but there are fewer specific incentives in place to encourage more experienced members of staff to continue developing their pedagogical competence. This said, it is generally encouraged that staff update their pedagogical competence, and there is overall great interest among staff to participate in shorter seminars, meetings etc to learn about and discuss pedagogical initiatives. Courses in pedagogical leadership are being offered at university level, and those involved in such work have participated in this.

Hiring decisions follow general university and faculty guidelines where both scientific and pedagogical competence are required, but where the emphasis clearly is on scientific competence. Rather than posing strict requirements to pedagogical competence, the Department’s policy has rather been to support new staff in acquiring such competence through pedagogical training. This is especially important given the large research institute sector in Norway, which means that many scientifically well qualified applicants come from a sector where teaching is not a part of ordinary work.

7. Internationalisation

The department has several exchange agreements with well reputed sociology departments internationally. The students can also choose between a wide variety of exchange agreements on both Faculty and University level. The bachelor programme has a mobility semester of 30 ECTS (it is also possible to incorporate more than 30 ECTS from international universities). Such exchanges are not compulsory, but an opportunity for students to extend their international competence and academic horizon. A member of the administration has particular responsibility for this area, and offers guidance to prospective exchange students.
It is recommended that BA-students do their exchange in their 5th term of study. MA-students have a tightly packed first year, and we recommend exchange in their 3rd term and to relate the exchange to work with the MA-thesis. Some students have wanted to go abroad in the 2nd term, but so far it has been difficult to establish exchange agreements with institutions that offer courses equivalent to our 2nd term. In 2016 14 BA students went on exchange, no MA students did an ordinary exchange, but one student took part in a summer school with a UiO collaboration partner.

All PhD-positions in the Department are announced internationally, and in the past three years we have recruited three PhD-fellows internationally. All PhD-students are recommended to spend some time abroad in order to learn from researchers in high quality universities / research institutions. Some of our students do this, but many also hesitate to go abroad for longer periods due to family reasons.

The department currently offers five English language courses in the BA-programme in sociology: SOS2402 - Family, gender equality and the welfare state, SOS2603 - Nordic welfare society - contemporary perspectives, SOS2700 - Religion in contemporary societies, fundamentalism, radicalization and religious violence, SOSGEO2800 - Migration, diversity, and inequality, SOSGEO2301 - Environment and society. At MA-level we offer: SOS4100 - Social Inequality in the 21st Century: Egalitarian Norway in Comparative Perspective, SOS4021 - Research Designs for Causal Inference (a phd-course, where also MA-students have access), SOSGEO4800 - Globalisation, migration and religion, SOSGEO4301 - Global environmental change.

The English language courses provide incoming international students with interesting study options, but also contribute to internationalisation for our own students “at home” as they are exposed to a more international group of students.

8. Relevance
Student surveys indicate that many sociology students (as well as other social science students) feel that their training does not provide them with good job opportunities. However, studies of former (e.g. Kandidatundersøkelsen) student find that a great majority report that they are employed and that the work they do is relevant to their education.

The department has in the past years increased its emphasis on career opportunities and labour market preparation. One specific measure is the mentor programme, as mentioned in question 2. Another is to collect a great number of career interviews with alumni which are published on our website. These demonstrate the wide variety of career tracks followed by sociologists, hopefully also inspiring prospective and current students to pave the ground for their own dreams. We also
benefit from collaborating with SV-FAK which employs a labour market coordinator and the Science Shop which facilitates collaborative projects between MA-students and companies and organisations. The students themselves also organize events where the labour market relevance of sociology is highlighted. Another initiative is to explicate labour market relevance in the course descriptions and encourage lecturers to address this issue explicitly in their teaching.

In order to sustain the labour market relevance of our study programmes the department has chosen to give priority to training in a broad repertoire of research methods, both qualitative and quantitative. Both the BA- and MA-programme contain 10 + 10 study credits in qualitative and quantitative methods respectively. Compared to other sociology programmes our impression is that our methods courses cover a wider range of methods and in more depth. The BA-programme also contains 10 credits in methodology, focusing on the entire research process and the connections between theory, research questions, data, analysis and conclusion. As many student feel that quantitative methods is particularly demanding, we provide a very intensive teaching programme in these courses with close follow-up through lab courses, seminars and drop-in events. Particularly motivated students are given the option of following PhD-courses in methods, although few have, so far, used this opportunity. Also the courses in qualitative methods contain practical exercises and mini research projects supervised through seminar groups.

UiOs recent survey of employers indicates that employers look for the ability to work independently and to acquire new knowledge. These are abilities students can train through working with supervised theses. Thus both BA- and MA-students write a thesis, and, contrary to many other programmes, we have maintained the MA-thesis as a 60 credits thesis requiring one year of fulltime work.

Finally, following a student initiative, we have increased the number of optional thematic courses in the BA-programme in order to allow for greater thematic specialization. In general we try to sustain a broad selection of thematic courses, which both reflects the breadth of the sociology discipline and is in line with the research specialities of the scientific staff.

A discussion about the relevance of the PhD-degree came up after the external evaluation of the PhD-program in 2016. The committee recommends the Faculty of social sciences to develop some courses on generic skills that will be useful in working life more generally. The Programme Council for the PhD will work further with this theme during spring 2017.

9. Educational leadership
The head of research is responsible for development of the PhD-programme, while the head of studies is responsible for the BA- and MA-programmes. Both are also part of the department’s executive group and thus meet weekly with the head of department and corresponding leaders at
the human geography section. The programme council in sociology is composed of members of staff from all academic levels, who are all active in teaching, and student representatives. In this way, academic leadership is well involved in the development of study programmes. The head of research takes part in the programme council for the PhD at the faculty level. This council consists of the heads of research in each discipline and two representatives for the PhD-students at the faculty.

The head of studies appoint staff members to be responsible for the various courses on offer in our study programmes. The person in charge of each course invites, if necessary, other members of staff or external resources to collaborate in teaching the course as guest lecturers or seminar tutors. This is done in dialogue with the head of studies to ensure that resources are available or not required elsewhere. Data from the work duty account is used in allocating personnel resources to teaching. From this we can see if someone has worked up surplus hours and thus is entitled to a lighter teaching burden, has been exempted from teaching due to external project, or has surplus capacity.

10. Academic staff research and development orientation in relation to education
As indicated by the figures below, the research competence of our teachers is very high. All permanent staff has PhD degrees or equivalent. Furthermore, all members of the scientific staff have positions which include mandatory research time. Professors and associate professors share their time between research and teaching roughly 50/50, while phd fellows and post-docs in most cases devote only 25% of their time to teaching. There are currently no pure researchers or university lecturers employed in sociology. All teaching provided by staff whose positions do not include mandatory research time are part time employees hired on hourly basis. A few will be retired professors, but the majority is former PhD or MA students who serve as seminar tutors.

We provide figures for the study programmes separately (figures include both lectures and seminar based teaching). We have included in the figures all teachers including part-timers hired on hourly basis.

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<th>Share of teaching given by academic staff with PhD or equivalent, 2016</th>
<th>Share of teaching given by academic staff whose positions do not include mandatory research time, 2016</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor programme</td>
<td>AWAITING DATA</td>
<td>AWAITING DATA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Masters programme</td>
<td>89,5 %</td>
<td>21,3 %</td>
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11. Research orientation in teaching methods and assessment

As noted above, all the sociology programmes contain a solid foundation in research methods (qualitative and quantitative), as well as independent research projects. The programmes’ learning outcomes include many points related to developing research related skills ranging from the purely methodological ones to being able to pull together knowledge from several sources and being able to formulate sociological research questions.

At BA-level a more practical approach has been incorporated in both qualitative and quantitative methods. Students perform interviews and practice writing field observations in seminars and write their term papers with on the basis of such hands-on research experiences (SVMET1010). In quantitative methods a number of compulsory assignments must be completed which include using statistical computer software packages (STATA) to perform data analysis (SOS1120). In this course we have also been able to systematise feedback through publishing aggregated descriptive statistics on the assignments, so that students can see how they perform relative to the class. Exams take the shape of practical problem solution and students are allowed to use their course book and notes when writing their exams. The methodology course (SOS3050) has been developed to support work with the BA-thesis. Through predominantly seminar based teaching students are trained in developing their own research questions and see the connections between research questions, theory and methods, but also to learn through observing and commenting others’ work. The incorporation of a 10 credits BA-thesis in the programme is also supporting the development of students’ research abilities.

The practical approach to teaching research methods is continued in the MA-programme. The teaching in qualitative methods (SOS4010) is focused on qualitative analysis, stimulating students to comprehend how to analyse qualitative data through various methodological approaches such as grounded theory, discourse analysis and narrative analysis. In seminars students work with mini research projects where they collect their own data and analyse these with a method of their choice. In quantitative methods compulsory seminars consist of practical exercises. In addition courses on practical aspects of working with statistical software packages are offered. In general, much of the teaching in their first year is used to prepare them for conducting independent research projects through their MA-thesis. In thematic courses discussions are raised to stimulate students to think about possible research questions for their theses. The SOS3050 seminars are designed to help students formulate their own research proposals. One strategy is to analyse good MA-dissertations with a view to understand what makes them successful. Finally, the MA-students spend their last year of study conducting their own independent research projects. Individual supervision is provided (up to 45 hours).

At PhD level all courses giving ECTs demand student activity in form of project presentations, assigned papers and active participation.