To: Pecos Programme Council

Dato: 28. oktober 2015

# Response to the Periodic Evaluation Committee Report

As requested by the Faculty of Social Sciences by letter dated 17.09.2014, PECOS has been subjected to a periodic evaluation by a committee consisting of Sunniva Engh, Eva-Maria Niedermeier, Magnus Öberg and Bjørn Stensaker (chair). We have received their report, and we are starting on a process of reform in which this report is a starting point.

The report was largely positive, which means that PECOS is not under an imminent threat of removal. Yet, there are many issues we should discuss. A premise for this process is that the total amount of resources spent should not be increased. A key aspect of this process is therefore that we are able to prioritize among competing proposals.

## Main points in the report

* PECOS staff/administration and students do not communicate very well.
* The intersection between History track and Political Science track is rugged.
* The programme is not very flexible.
* More structured thesis writing scheme.
* Improve recruitment procedures.
* Strengthen flow of information within PECOS.
* Establish a common PECOS scientific identity.
* Increase student participation; interactivity in classes.
* Utilize more work-relevant examination techniques.

## Response

The reponse will be structured in a slightly different order. It is again important to keep in mind that a number of the issues raised in the report either are beyond the powers of this council (i.e. the term sections at ISV or overall budgets) or would have to be decided at different fora.

### Recruitment

While PECOS has a very strong set of applicants, we have not always been able to select the optimal candidates. As illustrated in the self-evaluation report, this is a larger issue with STS students. The report recommends several possible avenues.

1. Interviewing, even by way of Skype, appears to be a time-consuming alternative in a part of the year already stretched to the limits. There are also legal-administrative aspects that must be sorted out before this alternative can be considered.
2. Bachelor thesis/term papers as part of the admission. As with interviews, this alternative seems rather costly with regard to time.
3. GRE scores. This alternative is seems an attractive alternative to the use of grades alone. As we already require a TOEFL test, the extension of the requirement appears as not unreasonable or overly cumbersome.

While we appreciate very much the recommendations made by the committee, we must not that they have not considered the large number of applicants that are offered admission but decline. Hence, what they refer to as a short list is indeed rather long and initially indeterminate. This fact undermines the feasibility of options 1 and 2.

### Communication with potential students

Our web pages are reported to be the main avenue of recruitment. The report recommends that we clarify these pages with regard to the content of the programme, the actual qualifications needed and the overall focus of the programme. A key issue in the latter point is the distinction between inter-, cross-, and multi-disciplinary.

It is my clear understanding that PECOS should be seen as primarily cross-disciplinary, meaning that each student remains rooted in his/her discipline with some input/inspiration from the other discipline. Any inclination towards anything that can be described as ‘fluid’, ‘fusion’, ‘transcendant’, etc. should be discouraged.

Furthermore, the report finds us more research-oriented than the incoming students expected. I believe this is largely a good thing, as I am a bit worried that PECOS students are accepted as above average and ejected as sub-standard academics. Compared to other MA students, they are less trained in research methods, and if they in addition were to be perceived as neither Political Scientists nor Historians then I would be very worried.

### Communication with present students

As the report states, our students receive information from a large number of sources. ISV and IAKH both circulate information, as does the Student Council, the Programme Coordinator and various teachers in different capabilities. Information appears through email, fronter, web-pages and SMS.

The report urges a streamlining of the flow of information through a single point and channel. I am less certain about this. While it is useful to consider who should inform about what and how, it is in general a good idea not to complicate the flow of information by introducing more actors. However, it is probably a good idea to be explicit about what kind of information that will arrive in what channels.

Furthermore, the Student Council should strengthen its role in the two-way communication process. In part, the communication problem consists of many independent and sometimes inconsistent dialogues between various actors and students. This is unfortunate.

### Web pages

A reoccurring issue is that the web pages are partially incomplete, sometimes outdated or at times incorrect. How can we identify and rectify these issues?

## Programme design

PECOS consists of six fixed classes, of which the two intermediate methods classes are track specific. The evaluation report is to a varying degree suggesting reform of these classes and their internal cohesion.

The most focused criticism is directed towards PECOS4010 and HIS4421. The latter is currently taught under a new direction, which invalidates most of the criticism raised. The former is in need of a total remake. The current setup, with a plethora of lecturers sandwiched by the course coordinator has shown itself to be confusing to the students, administratively demanding and vulnerable to unforeseen incidents. This class is in need of reform.

The methods classes are largely found to be in working order, albeit with some revisions required. PECOS4021 and PECOS4022 fare not too well with regard to teaching and examination. These classes are very much academic in their orientation and a rethinking of key elements could be useful. In particular, these classes seem to be well suited for group-based examination with an oral exam replacing the traditional school exam. It should be noted that PECOS4021 will offer a challenge next year due to otherwise jubilatory demographic events, which suggests that large-scale reform perhaps should be postponed.

The history methods class has been taught as a seminar for PECOS students. A couple of things has been suggested regarding this class earlier, among them that the seminar could be made to fit calendar-wise with the ISV teaching term section to ease the load on History track students. Furthermore a bit more focus on archival work would be welcome. Apart from this I feel that the sense of grave injustice voiced in the evaluation report on page 6 is misplaced.

The report suggests moving the internship towards the end of the fourth semester to counter the tendency of interns to drop out in favor of a full-time job. In this regard I believe the committee has the wrong perspective. I am much more inclined to see the internship as the foundation for a work-relevant MA thesis than as the conclusion of one.

Another issue is the lack of alternatives for exchange semesters. This is correct, but it is perhaps not that much of a problem. From my perspective, the small number of students present is a problem as it makes the programme fragile. Exporting exchange students would undercut the programme rather than strengthen it.

## Supervisors

The report excitingly describes the very structured form of supervision that is used at the Department for Peace and Conflict studies at Uppsala. In some form, this resembles supervision at IAKH, but not at ISV. I find the Uppsala model very intriguing, and it addresses a number of shortcomings in the current setup.

One way to implement this would be to make a deal with a team of supervisors, prior to the June application deadline, to share the incoming students among them according to theme and competence. This would reduce the lag between application and supervisor assignment, but it would also limit the ability of students to hook up with their preferred candidate.

The large number of highly competent researchers in the area can be seen as a resource too valuable to dismiss. An alternative model is that we allow for outside co-supervision, so that the student in question does group-based supervision with the designated team but facetime with the external supervisor. While this model might seem fragile, recent examples suggest that it might just work quite well. In a number of cases from the last couple of years the external supervisor has (or should have) expressed doubt about his/her ability to guide the student towards a thesis that fits within the designated discipline. As a consequence, we have insisted that external supervisors (with exceptions merited on subjective judgement) should be paired with an internal supervisor.

Another alternative is to implement a split model. Indeed, the students that diligently arrange for their supervision are seldom in trouble when May comes. It might be that we could arrange for this kind of team supervision for a select group only. Having said that, the difficulty of staffing these supervision teams should not be underestimated. Hearsay evidence from Uppsala suggests that MA supervision is very time consuming and exhausting for the persons involved.

### Cohesiveness

We receive criticism for the fragmented nature of the programme. The classes don’t really speak to one another, and the divide across the square is prohibiting cross-fertilization between history and political science.

The report requests a better understanding among the PECOS teaching staff across the various classes and suggests a platform for regular meetings.

I think this is an excellent idea, but it should be allowed to develop slowly. Initially a short lunch meeting for everyone involved in 2016 could be held to discuss the report and share experiences.

## Vocational training or Academic excellence?

A point made in the report is that PECOS should set its academic ambitions higher that what was outlined in the report at one Ph.D. student per year, given the high quality of the students accepted. Here, the committee commits an ecological fallacy. The threshold for acceptance only describes the level of the least competent successful applicant. It is not correct to conclude that the 10 best PECOS students are better than the 20 best ISV/IAKH students on this basis alone.

Furthermore, the traditional Master’s programmes are more geared towards an academic career, something which is very apparent in the comparatively low focus on methodology within the PECOS programme.

As such, it is fair to say that PECOS is more vocational in its orientation than the other programmes, but that is remains an academic programme and should be evaluated as such.

On the other hand, several suggestions by the committee that are work-life oriented should not be seen as undermining the academic standards of the programme.

* Multi-authored research is increasingly common, which means that multi-authored evaluation products should be encouraged
* Oral presentation skills are useful in academia

## Overall cost structure

The report does not in any way discuss the cost side of the PECOS programme. It would be interesting to compare the resources spent on a PECOS student compared to similar IAKH and ISV master students. Furthermore, it would be interesting to list the various functions that PECOS either fulfills or is supposed to fulfill, and the positive externalities that are created.

For example, PECOS makes it easier for ISV to fulfill its requirement with regard to English-language classes for exchange students. At the same time, the programme is quite costly, with a designated administrator at both departments and a designated programme coordinator.

## What is our strategy?

It seems fruitful to pick up on a number of issues that are reported as unclear and specify what the answer to these questions should be in a strategy document. This document should also specify the order of our priorities and serve as a guide in the implementation of the reform process.

## To-do

* Reform PECOS4010
* Reform PECOS4022
* Call a general meeting of everyone teaching PECOS classes (except 4010)
* Consider changes to recruitment procedures
* Go through each class
  + Evaluate the teaching and examination form
  + Consider whether the class can be optimized as part of PECOS
    - Contents
    - Teaching methods
    - Timing

# Plan of Action

1. Call a plenary meeting with the students in coordination with the student council
2. Attend meeting with Faculty of Social Sciences
3. Prepare a reform plan for the Spring meeting
4. Prepare a strategy document