

To: PMR

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Periodic evaluation of the course MARLTHESIS – Master thesis in Maritime Law, autumn 2015

I. Introduction/background

This periodic evaluation is the first evaluation of this course after the reform of the Norwegian Master in Law programme in 2011.

The master thesis in the Maritime Law programme consists of 30 ECTS. The writing of the master is mandatory for all students enrolled in the Maritime Law programme. Other students cannot register for this course.

The thesis is an independent work, and the topic is of the student's own choice (but must have connection to maritime law). It is not taught as a standard course at the Faculty of Law with regular lectures/seminar groups throughout the semester. There are instead offered a few introductory seminars on thesis writing; covering topics such as how to outline the structure, how to best use the library, and how to engage in the writing process. A supervisor is appointed to each student based on topic, the students' wishes and available supervisors.

As an essential part of the LLM programme in Maritime Law it is the Head of Programme who is responsible teacher and has the responsibility to supervise that the Master thesis course is run in accordance with the aims of the programme's learning outcome/achievement requirements.

This evaluation report is based on an evaluation survey the Faculty Administration sent to all the students registered for the MARLTHESIS course autumn 2015. Of the 17 registered students, there were only four responses which is a rather small number to base the report on.

There has also not been carried out any reports from a Supervising Examiner since 2011.

The report is therefore in addition to the survey, based on experiences from and feed-back given to the Head of Programme, the Student advisor at the Institute and some of the teachers that is regularly used as supervisors.

There was sent a similar survey to the students writing their master thesis on the LLM in Information and Communication Technology Law (ICTL programme) autumn 2015. There were also only four responses to that survey. The writing of the master thesis at the ICTL-programme



follow almost the same pattern as the MARLTHESIS and this survey is therefore also used for comparison and back ground material for the report.

II. Content

Reading material: There is no mandatory reading material listed for the MARLTHESIS course. The writing of the thesis is based on the students own gathering of reading material.

Teaching:

A. Supervision

The MARLTHESIS course consists mainly of individual supervision of each student and independent work from the side of the student.

The supervision offered is 15 hours that includes all forms of contact between the student and the supervisor like; meetings face to face, e-mails, phone contact, reading of drafts, commenting on drafts with more.

For 80-90% of the students it is the Institute (Head of Programme/ Study Advisor) who finds the supervisor. It is usually few students who search for and approach a possible supervisor themselves.

In the survey the feed-back on the supervision varies a lot among the four who have answered. It varies from Satisfied to Unsatisfied. The four who answered the ICTL survey were in general more satisfied. Two MARL students answer that they had not sufficient contact with their supervisor. One commented that the supervisor was absent, the other one writes that he/she thought he/she could manage to write the thesis on his/her own, but regretted later that he/she had not made more use of the supervisor.

The Institute stresses early in the spring semester that it is important that the students make use of their supervisor and that they contact them early in the process and that the student and supervisor make a plan together for handing in of drafts, schedule meetings with more. This is encouraged repeatedly throughout the semesters and on all meetings. Even so the Institute does experience that many students do not make contact with the appointed supervisor at all or only very late in the process, often just before the deadline. This is very unfortunate. Several supervisors do comment that they could have helped the students raising their grade one or two levels if they only had made contact and sent drafts earlier. The Institute is trying to find ways to improve the use of supervisors.

The latest class (2015-2016) that will deliver their thesis autumn 2016 (and did not take part in the survey) have been much more active in finding and approaching supervisors themselves. It is maybe a good idea to leave the search for supervisors more to the students because then they "own" the process of choosing the supervisor themselves and will maybe be using the supervisor more actively.

Outside the survey there have been few students who comment on the supervision to the Study advisor or other staff. There is always one or two who report that they are extremely satisfied and one or two who are not so satisfied each year. The Institute had therefore hoped that more students had answered the survey to get more insight into how they experience the supervision. Often the ones who do answer surveys are the ones who are either very satisfied or very unsatisfied and those who are in general satisfied do not bother.

The experience/feed-back on supervision is, on the one hand, that occasionally supervisors may be too slow in responding to drafts sent to them by students while, on the other hand, students are often too passive in making use of the service and skills of supervisors, typically resulting in drafts being submitted so late in the process that there is limited scope to achieve those improvements which potentially could be made. In this respect supervisor of the LLM programme often serve as supervisors for ordinary Norwegian master students writing their master thesis in the elective course of Maritime Law, and there is no marked difference in experience as to how the two student groups make use of the service of supervisors.

B. Lectures/meetings on how to write a master thesis

In addition to the supervision the students has been offered one introductory lecture early in the spring semester on how to write a master thesis at the Faculty of Law by staff at the Institute. They are also given the possibility to discuss choice of topics with the Head of Programme or other staff before they hand in their choice of topic.

They are further offered one more following up meeting before summer where the students present their topics and how far they have come in the process with their thesis.

In the final autumn semester the students are offered one following-up meeting in early September where status and progress is checked and the students have the possibility to ask questions and to raise problems and challenges in the writing process. They are offered to send in written questions / issues to be dealt with before the meeting.

In early October the students are offered another similar meeting where the students can seek advice, but focus is mainly on how to deliver the thesis in Fronter and DUO, Requirements and so on.

For the summer meeting and the two meetings in the autumn semester the Head of Programme and Student Advisor is present and in charge of these meetings.

There is a high percentage of the class that meets for the introductory lecture on how to write a master thesis at the Faculty of Law (70-90%). The Institute staff usually receives positive responses to the lecture. This is also shown in the survey where 70% is satisfied with the lecture.

For the meeting before summer vacation the attendance is also usually rather high; approximately 60-70%.

There are often a lot fewer students who meet for the master meetings in the autumn semester. One reason for this is that several students travel back to their home countries during summer and stay there also in the autumn semester. Supervision can be done online (e-mail, sometimes phone) and after the delivery of the master theses became completely online based two years ago, it has become even more convenient to stay at home the last semester. For students with family and family obligations this is a good solution. Another reason that few meet can be that they are busy with writing and don't want to spend time in meetings, some have also written master theses before and feel they do not need more support. There can also be that the students are unsure of the use of these meetings.

Based on the experience/ feed-back from those who do come for the meetings the ones who meet seem to be glad for the opportunity to ask questions and the opportunity to get some support/help in the writing process.

Another general feed-back on the meetings offered is that some think it can be a bit tedious to sit and listen to other students' projects and progress. But from the point of the Institute it is very useful to get the students together and get an overview of the projects and a status of how far they have come.

In the survey there were unfortunately no questions about these "writing-support meetings" so there was no comments about these.

Else, every year there is common that students report to staff at the Institute that they struggle with the writing process and struggles with choosing a topic.

Conclusion:

How well the supervision works varies. The Institute would like that the students should make use of their supervisor earlier in the process and use them more actively. It also varies how well the master meetings in the writing process works and there should possibly be offered more efficient/useful activities. There could also be offered more support and knowledge on how to choose a topic for the master thesis.

Resources and infrastructure (teaching rooms, audiovisual support, library etc)

The lecture on how to write a master thesis and the meetings is mainly held in the meeting rooms at the Institute. The survey shows that the students are 80-100% satisfied with the teaching rooms.

Neither students nor the teachers have reported any need for more specialized audiovisual teaching tools.

In the survey there was asked questions where the students use to work with their thesis. Of the eight students who answered both the ICTL and MARL survey, show that it varies where they choose to study. 25% use the law library or reading halls at the Faculty, 15% used reading halls at Blindern Campus, 60% chose to study elsewhere (home, cabins etc). Impressions from

conversations with the students about where they like to work with their theses are that the pattern shown in the survey is giving a true picture of the situation. Most of the students the Institute have talked with say they study at home/other places than the Faculty. That they do choose to study at home doesn't mean that they are not happy with the study facilities at the Faculty, when asked they say the Faculty facilities are fine, and have no suggestions for improvement. They just prefer to study at home. Those who do choose to work with their thesis at the Faculty report they are very satisfied with the study environment.

Conclusion: The resources and infrastructure offered works in general well for when writing the master thesis.

Exam (form of exam, form of assessment):

The form of exam is a written thesis. The substantive portion of the thesis should be no more than 18,000 words, footnotes included (table of content, acknowledgements, bibliography, tables and registers not included).

The thesis is graded by the grading scale A-F, where F = Fail.

The students cannot hand in a new thesis or improved version of their thesis if they are receiving a passing grade.

The thesis is examined by the supervisor and an additional appointed examiner. In 2014 there was written new joint guidelines for the master theses for the four master degrees in English at the Faculty. Then it was discussed if the examining of the thesis should be changed so that the supervisor is no longer a part of the exam commission, like it has been changed for the 5 year Norwegian Master in Law programme. Maritime Law is a somewhat esoteric subject and at the Institute it's been evaluated that it will be difficult and rather resource demanding to find enough examiners. This has an aspect also towards achieving a fair and consistent grading of candidates; although challenging for the supervisor to also appear as marker, it is a balancing act towards risking having markers with no sufficient knowledge of the topics. It has therefore been concluded that the old exam system should be retained.

In the Faculty survey there was unfortunately no questions about the form of exam/ assessment of the thesis. The experience of the Institute is that few students have comments on the grading scale used or the form of the assessment.

Conclusion: The form of assessment for the master thesis seems to work fine.

Learning outcome (does the text on the course's web-page give a good description of the students' competence after examination?)

The learning outcome is described as *"The objective is for a student to engage in research work. The student will learn how to find relevant material, analyze the material and make a systematic presentation, which will be evaluated"*.

The Institute's experience is that the description of the learning outcome on the web-page, is ok and have never received any direct comments regarding this.

The survey shows that the four students agreed above average that the learning objectives for the master thesis were fulfilled. A bit more than the students in the ICTL survey.

Conclusion: The answers and feed-back to staff at the Institute indicates that most of the students don't find much discrepancy between what has been written on the web-page about learning outcome and what they felt they had learned after the course.

III. Does the description of the course on web work in a satisfactory way?

- Grades, withdrawals, formal complaints

The MARLTHESIS, is as former mentioned mandatory for the LLM students enrolled in the Maritime Law programme and only open for registrations for these students. It is therefore very few who withdraw from the course unless they withdraw from the whole programme. But there have been an increasing number of students who do postpone the thesis registration from the autumn to the spring semester. According to general regulations at the University, students can be one semester delayed without any given reason. The percentage of students who complete the programme on time has usually been very high for the Maritime Law programme, but the last year there has been an increased number of students who are delayed in the delivering of their master thesis. There has not been any change in the teaching and there is no obvious explanation for the increased number of delayed thesis deliveries.

From 2011-2015, of a student group between 16 and 20 students, the average delivered master thesis in the autumn semester is 14 and in the spring semester 4. In 2015 only 10 theses were delivered in autumn and 6 in spring. It will be interesting to see if this tendency continues or if 2015 was just a temporary change. Average grade is B for the theses delivered both in the autumn and in the spring. The grading scale in its full breadth is used. Students have received all from A to E on their theses. But the students usually receive grades on the upper end of the scale. In average there are 5 students of 14 who receive an A in the autumn semester.

The last five years there have been one student who have sent a formal appeal regarding the result of the master thesis and appealed on the grounds of formal error. The student did not receive support for his appeal and the result was upheld.

- Feedback in surveys, to teachers and administrative staff

As mentioned above the survey shows that the students in general feel the learning objectives were fulfilled. Students often comment at the Diploma ceremony that the writing of the master thesis has been very tiring and stressful process, but that it at the same time has been the process they have learned the most throughout the master programme (together with the mock trial course).

- Is the course placed on the right level/ right semester? Does it fit with the rest of the courses in the LLM programme

The master thesis is scheduled as the final course of the master programme as it is for most master programmes around the world. It is placed in the end of the programme so the students can make use of all the former learned knowledge and demonstrate their legal writing skills. Clearly this is the appropriate way of organizing the course, as reflected also in how the regular Norwegian master students write their master thesis towards the end of the law studies.

From the LLM programme's point of view the Master thesis is placed on the right level and in the right semester. We have received no negative comments from students about when this course is taught.

- Is the course defined in accordance to the recommended prerequisite knowledge?

It is recommended that the students have passed and completed all the mandatory courses and the two elective courses in the programme before the master thesis is handed in. It is the experience of the Institute that most students have completed all courses at the time they hand in their master thesis. The high percentage of students who pass the course indicates that the course is in accordance with the prerequisite knowledge.

Conclusion: From the survey and the feed-back it seems like the description on the web-page is in accordance with the students' expectations and experience.

IV. Has there been any change since the last periodic evaluation?

The MARLTHESIS course in its general form has not undergone any big changes since the LLM programme was established in 2002. There has not been any periodic evaluation of the course since the reform in 2011 and the current staff has also not found any periodic evaluation reports of the master thesis in the archives before the reform either.

V. Suggestions for improvements

When it comes to the teaching of this course there are on the basis of feed-back, experiences and findings in the survey reasons to suggest that there is room for improvement.

The last five years there has been made a couple of attempts in dividing the master students into groups based on choice of topics and further that the students in these groups should present their topic/outline/chapters for each other. This has never worked out very well. It was usually difficult to make groups because the students choose very different topics. It also very much varied as to who met for the presentations and usually the students in the groups were in very different levels of the writing process. The organization of these groups and the presentation rounds were also very time consuming. Based on experiences and feed-back from the students the group project has been seen to be using too many resources and few positive results.

One of the feed-backs from the students is that it is difficult to find a topic and that several students do not know how to approach a thesis project. Another is that they are insecure on how to write a thesis at the Faculty.

Communication with staff organizing the master theses for the other three master programmes in English at the Faculty, shows that the students on these three programmes are facing similar challenges.

For spring 2016 it was therefore organized a joint pilot project for the initial phase of the master thesis course for the three LLM programmes. Since the challenges are similar for the three programmes the thought is to gather scarce resources into an improved up-start-phase. The idea is to give the students better tools and knowledge in how to organize and start their master thesis project.

In cooperation with the librarian Bård Tuseth and based on the model on how information is given to the students on the Norwegian 5 year master programme the LLM students are offered two joint lectures in the spring semester.

The first lecture is on project design and gives the students information on how to go about finding a suitable master thesis topic/ how to make a good choice for their master thesis. The lecture was held by Bård Tuseth and one of the Head of Programmes (this time Cecilia Bailliet)

After this lecture the students were urged to contact relevant academic staff to try and test out their ideas and get advice. But they were asked to do some thinking, research and write down their ideas before approaching academic staff.

About three weeks later the students should hand in their topic to their student advisor.

The experience was that the students this year did decide a topic easier than the previous years and much more students than earlier did send in their topics within the deadline.

Before the end of the spring semester, just after the exams of ordinary courses, there will be given another joint lecture for the three LLMs. This time the focus will be on writing a master thesis at the Faculty. The lecture will again be given by Bård Tuseth. The lecture is given this late so the students will have the information on writing fresh in mind when they are embarking on the last semester of thesis writing.

In autumn 2016 there should be carried out an evaluation on how these new joint lectures are received and if this form of master-theses teaching should be continued.

Another suggestion for improvement is of the supervision. As previously mentioned; it is an idea for the future to make the students more engaged in the finding of their own supervisor so that they feel that they own this process more and hopefully make more use of their supervisor.

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