

Ideas for strengthening the MA Human Rights in Theory and Practice

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Summary:

Since taking over as leader in 2019, it is apparent that there is need for reform to strengthen the MA programme. These needs are identified based on my own reflections since working at NCHR, but also on consultations with staff and students e.g. individually, but also there have been two internal meetings: one half day workshop with the education committee (also with student representatives presenting their views) held in February, and one education committee follow up meeting in March. A number of areas have been identified that overlap but are easier to separate as: first, those that address our internal *processes and systems* concerning quality and; second, a broader vision of the *substance and coherence* of the programme as a whole in light of institutional changes at NCHR, within theory and practices in the field of human rights, and also broader trends in the Faculty of Law –not least, such as the CELL initiative- as follows:

Processes and systems:

- To *improve and standardize exam feedback process*:
 - Clear criteria regarding giving feedback should be standardised across the programme; with adherence to these criteria; and to communicate in advance to students on expectations and process;
 - Provide feedback upon request but with examiners taking a more explicit default mode than previously whereby requests are anticipated and notes made during grading to be used in developing feedback.
 - Feedback as 2-3 paragraphs but with an explanation for the grade that is not merely descriptive but also which identifies some specific areas for improving the piece of work; ideally submitted electronically (but system not developed yet).
 - The internal examiner(s) for each course should be the one responsible for standardizing sets of comments and to distribute them to students (i.e. not to rely on an external examiner who neither has the oversight of the course, nor, readings which the course leader should have).
- To clearly convey and standardize *word limit* regarding written work: in order to avoid unevenness in how this is interpreted by students across courses, which can appear inconsistent and confusing about what is or isn't permitted.
- To *vary exam assessment format*- more continuous assessment e.g. perhaps multiple choice and other options, group work assessment etc., graded mid-terms for obligatory courses only; more 'school exams' rather than an over reliance on 'take home' exams.
- *Scheduling*: to organize course leaders and coordinators get together to discuss scheduling, especially in view of decongesting and therefore lengthening the Spring semester.

Other adjustments:

- To *develop co-teaching* and the 2/3 time bank provision.
- Use *Canvas system* of course assessment to provide additional feedback
- Book *assessment* of HUMR MA Programme
- Better distribution of course leadership and need for additional courses.

Developing coherence and reforming the Programme

- *HUMR 5191- Methods course:*
 - We seek to move this from the 2nd semester instead to the 3rd semester. The move and redesign is mainly because this course has proven difficult for students to grasp and could transfer skills better: 1) it has been previously too early in their dissertation process (dissertation to be completed 4th semester), and therefore, can feel very abstract for the students; and, 2) in relation, students have not necessarily gained practical transferable skills, such as interviewing techniques (i.e. not just the theory of qualitative methods, but how to go about conducting an interview).
 - We would now therefore much rather prefer practical ('how to do') and problem solving examples of research design and methodology, which the students can apply to their own dissertation design. From spring semester 2019 we have started reforms by starting to introduce new practices. Student assessment for the course is now a semester-long research design paper that draws directly on the classes (and seminars) throughout the semester; more group work and plenaries to discuss dissertation topics and design are now featured more prominently. Because of the challenges of interdisciplinary methods, seminars also enable more indepth follow-up. We will also consider whether to subdivide the course into different 'packages' options for students, depending on their interests, and possibly, also in terms of developing specific professional skills (see also below re. 'HUMR 4504' and 'CELL').
 - It is also only likely that students really start to think in more detail about their dissertation by the third semester, and also in terms of FrittOrd proposals then (September), and so this time frame is a better 'fit' with conceptualizing the dissertation and seeing the relevance of and in applying methods. We would also bring forward the dissertation proposal submission to allow more time for this as part of the Methods course (currently students have not been submitting the dissertation proposal until December prior to the 4th semester for the dissertation).
 - Moving the Methods course would also mean students will now have a common meeting point in that 3rd semester. Currently, it is only electives in the 3rd, which fragments the students, and who therefore already feel possibly more isolated even before they start the dissertation in the 4th semester when they are definitely more isolated. We see advantages by changing to a better spread across the semesters. The students, in other words, don't lose an elective option but rather can space them out better over the programme (swopping an elective in 3rd semester with 2nd, for example).
 - Two implications, however, are: first, as a consequence, the first semester should have a more structured entry point both for 'methodology' from the outset of the 1st semester- and an elementary idea of its purpose and importance. In addition, students also need earlier input into how to write academically, which can be challenging for students from different disciplines and academic cultures. Some of this will be integrated into the 3 obligatory courses lectures but in addition, we would seek extra seminars (x 4) using in-house staff only, in which some common understandings of 'methodology' and 'multidisciplinarity' and 'academic writing' can be anchored at an early stage. The other implication will be for

internationalization and student exchanges: though we stress here that perhaps strengthening the Programme is a higher priority, and also, that most of our students to some extent already will have had an international experience, or, with the programme in effect the international experience for many (programme in English and many different nationalities, and a good number of Norwegian students who possibly have first degree from outside Norway etc).

- *HUMR 4504 – Human rights in Practice:*
 - this course previously involved only the internship itself and was not providing students with sufficient preparation in terms of depth of knowledge and skills concerning human rights practice. Students encounter in their internships very different organisations, with very different approaches and methods of working, organisational culture, financing modalities etc., and it is important that students get better preparation with this in mind. The course will also contribute better to achieving the desired effect that students base their dissertations on their internship experience.
 - The course is now designed around teaching as a set of dilemmas and choices that can be used as a method for human rights practice. A range of lectures has been introduced to discuss for example: the role and dilemmas of practice, different actors and organisational cultures; approaches to litigation; simulating an advocacy strategy; ‘alternative’ fact-finding in human rights monitoring and documentation and so on. So that students can also hear firsthand from practitioners, the course also draws on one or two presentations by selected professionals in human rights organisations, e.g. Norwegian National Institute for Human Rights; Amnesty International; Reddbarna.
 - To expand internship options, there has been an increase in the number and diversity of partner organisations: students have placement/internships both internally within NCHR’s International Department, but also within a range of partner organisations (e.g. UNDP, NIM, FOKUS, NRC, NHRF, AI; Chinese Law universities; a Kenyan grass roots organisation etc. and also ‘pre approved’ organizations e.g. NOAS, CARE, other UN bodies etc, Norwegian Embassies). There are also possibilities to expand more overseas (see below, InternAbroad).
 - In relation to CELL: There is even more scope here for developing the course and making it more problem-solving based teaching. To that end, it obviously overlaps with ‘pillar’ 5 (clinical practice) and somewhat 3 (advocacy) and - however, most of our students do a range of activities within organisations that is much broader than clinical e.g. monitoring, advocacy, administration, research- which we do not feel is captured adequately in the term ‘clinical’ and rather this pillar might be relabelled ‘clinical and organisational practice’
 - In terms of thinking about future needs, and internationalization: an application is being considered to DIKU under its ‘Intern abroad’ programme for placing up to 5-6 students with South African-based human rights organisations (also possibly to include the Norsk Ambassaden in Pretoria) per year. Furthermore use of Erasmus + is also being looked into.
- We would also like to take a closer look at possible reforms to the other compulsory courses:

- e.g. but not only, *HUMR 5132- Law in Context*: and how this might be designed in a way to assist students to grasp legal and institutional and actors shaping application of law and human rights in specific contexts.
- Lastly, in terms of *internationalization*: another idea is to form an institutional arrangement and partnership with the University of Pretoria’s Centre for Human Rights, as the basis for student exchanges, internships and research collaboration with NCHR- but this depends on whether a new call through DIKU is forthcoming – in the meantime, the Intern Abroad application could pave the way for a longer term institutional collaboration
- *Electives/Valgfritt emne*: we would like to revise the number and topics in order to match better both staff and student interests. Currently it is arranged -as per the programme web page- as follows:

“**During Term II**,... students should choose one elective course. Elective courses offered by the NCHR are the following:

- [HUMR5145 – Human Rights in Asia](#)
- [HUMR5508 – Human Rights and Diversity - Leading Cases and Core Dilemmas](#)
- [HUMR5702 – Human Rights and Sustainable Development: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Theory and Practices](#)

During Term III, students are required to choose three elective courses. The elective courses offered by the NCHR are, for the time being, the following:

- [HUMR5133 – Business and Human Rights](#) (autumn)
- [JUS5134 – The Right to Peace](#) (autumn 2018, 2020)
- [HUMR5502 – Dealing with Diversity: Human Rights Approaches to Ethnic Conflict](#)(autumn)
- [JUS5503 – Human Rights and Counter-Terrorism: Striking a Balance?](#) (autumn 2017, 2019)”

We are fully aware of the Faculty’s efforts to rationalize the elective options but should point out the following: 1) Though initially looking a reasonable number, however, upon closer inspection: 2 on offer (JUS 5134, and JUS 5503) are not actually HUMR courses and have minor HUMR teaching input. In addition, they are also offered only every other year, which also underutilizes NCHR resources. So, we suggest these two courses are rather moved to the more general Faculty list of electives available to our students. That would leave only 5 electives – whereas we would suggest closer to 8 would be more accurate.

Possible suggestions are also to consider updating our portfolio in light of newer staff’s research interests and need for more diverse inclusion of topics. One option is to change the current Asia course (which belonged to a previous period in NCHR’s development) into a regional human rights mechanisms course – to draw upon not only Asia, but more so, European, American and African systems – so that students are exposed to a much broader global array of experiences, and in a critical area of human rights research. Another is in how the Sustainable Development course might also consider incorporating more global perspectives across the global north and south, for example, by looking also at socio-economic rights, and other issues also in the so-called developed global north. Both of these changes

could be done by revising the existing electives. But where we do see a more pressing need is to have a more diverse range of choices: therefore in the short term to add a philosophical elective – to enable to use of research expertise in teaching on their own course. Again, in view of a relatively small range of choices offered by HUMR, in effect 5, we see good reasons for allowing one addition, not least in that we have capacity amongst staff.

Lastly, one more idea might be that to ensure human rights perspectives are adequately represented in the electives chosen, HUMR students must take for example 2 HUMR courses out of the 4 electives.

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