

Mandatory Final Course Evaluation - 1st time

Final-course Evaluation

Course: MAE4231 Research Skills II

Semester 4th: Spring 2020

Answering frequency: 9/9 (100% response rate);

Date: 22.05.2020

The evaluation was conducted at the end of the MAE4231 course, beginning of May 2020 (after students handed in the exam but before they received the grade), through an online questionnaire hosted on the UiO platform, Nettskjema. Nine out of the ten students who started the course in the autumn of 2019 responded the form; one out of the ten students delayed the academic year, which provided an effective response rate of 100%. The participation in the survey, although requiring a FEIDE identification, allowed no personal information available at system level therefore ensuring no possibility of tracking back individual responses and ensuring complete anonymity.

The questionnaire was organized along several dimensions the course was designed upon, as mandatory questions, as well as an overall evaluation of the course and lecturers' performance and open comments, as voluntary. All aspects received a 100% response rate. The evaluation consisted of the opinions of the students with respect to all three modules of the course. More precisely, we evaluated:

- the structure and clarity of sessions in relation to the course objectives;
- the relevance of tasks, materials and examples during lectures, course assignments in relation to the content of the thesis and compulsory reading;
- the group work;
- the opportunities for feedback (during lectures and outside of sessions);
- the exam in the form of a portfolio and
- the overall relevance and utility of MAE4231 in the context of the MAE program.

The statements above were asking the agreement of students through 13 items of mandatory nature answered on a five point Likert Scale (1=strongly disagree, 3 = neither disagree nor agree, 5=strongly agree). As a final mandatory question students were asked about the effort put in the course in terms of workload expressed as the approximate number of hours per week.

In addition, the evaluation contained two dimensions, of voluntary nature, concerning: the course quality (2 items answered on a five point Likert scale, where 1=very poor, 5=very good) and the assessment of the lecturers' performance (1 item for each lecturer, answered as a grade from F to A).

Finally, the students were given the opportunity to provide feedback, asked through: what was appreciated in the course; what could be improved in the course and any issues they would like to add. We report on all these aspects in the next paragraphs.

The main viewpoints reflecting the student comments are provided in Table 1.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
In my view, the content and structure of the lectures were clear.				3 (33.3%)	6 (66.7%)
The task we were asked to work upon/discuss as a group were relevant for each session.				5 (55.6%)	4 (44.4%)
The materials/practical examples were relevant.				4 (44.4%)	5 (55.6%)
I appreciate that the course assignments were directly related to the content of the thesis.				4 (44.4%)	5 (66.7%)
In my experience, the compulsory reading list/ the book was useful.		1 (11.1%)	3 (33.3%)	3 (33.3%)	2 (22.2%)
The group work/discussions during the sessions were helpful.		1 (11.1%)		4 (44.4%)	4 (44.4%)
I could see that there was a structure behind each session.				3 (33.3%)	6 (66.7%)
I found there were opportunities for feedback in most face to face sessions.				3 (33.3%)	6 (66.7%)
I appreciate that there were extra opportunities for feedback planned outside of the regular teaching.				1 (11.1%)	8 (88.9%)
Overall, I appreciated all feedback from the teachers.				2 (22.2%)	7 (77.8%)
Overall, the structure of the course, the lectures and the assignments were aligned with this course's objectives/learning outcomes.			1 (11.1%)	4 (44.4%)	4 (44.4%)
The exam as a portfolio with assignments from each module is relevant and most suited for this type of course.			1 (11.1%)	4 (44.4%)	4 (44.4%)
I believe MAE4231 is a relevant and helpful course in the context of the MAE program.		1 (11.1%)		1 (11.1%)	7 (77.8%)

Table 1. Response distribution (raw, %) for the mandatory items

Overall, MAE4231 was evaluated as a clear focused course with respect to its structure and clarity of sessions in relation to its learning objectives. The tasks, materials and examples during lectures and course assignments were considered relevant in relation to the content of the thesis. The compulsory reading (the book) was considered as useful by the majority of students. They mostly found helpful the group work/discussions during the sessions. The opportunities for feedback, both allowing time for

feedback during the seminars as well as the organized extra open office sessions for one on one feedback were one of the most valued part of this course. The exam as a portfolio with assignments from each module was considered relevant and most suited for this type of course. Finally, almost all students found MAE4231 a relevant and helpful course in the context of the MAE program; there is one exception, by one participant who motivated his/her answer in the open comments as applying more to an enforced course. While the same student appreciated the course for “110% commitment from Alexandra and Stephen all year long, at the end of the day the second year of masters studies is incredibly heavy and stressful”. More detailed comments can be found in a separate section of this report.

Concerning the last mandatory question, what was the workload in terms of approximate nr of hours per week for the course, students spent a quite spread range of time, between 1 to 15 hours per week.

With respect to the overall quality, 66.7% and 33.3% of the students found the course as very good and good, respectively. Similarly, the overall competence of the lecturers/course coordinator for teaching this course was: very good (77.8%) and good (22.2%).

Lastly, on a voluntary basis, the students were asked to rate the performance of both lecturers/coordinator with a grade under the UiO rating scheme (F to A). Both Alexandra and Stefan were appreciated with an A by all students in the course.

The course was appreciated for the following aspects:

- Structure, materials and feedback as in:

“ Well-structured material, timely and useful feedback ”

“ I appreciated the feedback we recieved for our work. The feedback was useful. ”

“ The students are more pushed to participate in this seminar, which is beneficial for their future career as a researcher. ”

“ I like the current structure. It is very useful to learn how to communicate our research efficiently. ”

“Details of the seminars and assignments that covered many aspects in researcher skills, not only in academic writing, but also in professional communication and personal improvement. ”

- Relevance to thesis:

“It is very relevant to our thesis, it was fun, and intriguing and overall well-planned. ”

“It was really helpful to have a course that is related to writing the master thesis alongside writing the actual thesis. The course provides good exercises for how to present your study. ”

“ The modules were very helpful and relevant for the thesis. The content was well organised and we were given every opportunity to provide feedback. We were also given extremely helpful advice from all the lecturers. ”

- Lecturers/ coordinator’s personal style of teaching and capacity to adapt:

“Prompt adaptation to changing circumstances. ”

“It was taught with passion and style. ”

“The course was well run and was appropriate for this stage of the course. The lecturers were very helpful and knowledgeable. ”

“ Openness from lecturers, many opportunities to shape the program to our needs, very open to feedback. motivational and human! interesting guest lecturers. ”

“Thank you for your emotional efforts and extra time for listening to us! As the first graduates we needed this and absolutely appreciated it. ”

Suggestions for improvement

Several points were expressed that can either improve the current course or link it better with other courses in the MAE program:

- Students identified a disconnect between RS I and RS II and suggested in particular that:
“Academic writing, providing a structure for a paper, would come in handy at an earlier stage”.
- Several students referred to the parallel course in the 4th semester and noted that more specific help in working on their thesis would have been helpful:
“If there is time for it, a word document as a short-guidelines for writing thesis (important points) from Intro to abstract, so students can have this document available on their hands at all times when writing the thesis”.
- A need for an even more in depth writing course:
“It might be useful to teach student in detail how to argue in a smart way in their writing, such as how writing center teaches argumentative writing and comparative analysis. - It will be nice to zoom-in into writing literature review, for example”
 - Having the feedback sessions as mandatory:
“One session one on one as mandatory. I think it would be helpful for everyone to meet at least once to talk about own written work.”
- Having MAE4231 as a voluntary course. This is explained in detail by one student and we consider his/her feedback is very insightful in students’ experiences in this course and the MAE program in general:
“This takeaway applies more so to mandatory courses enforced by CEMO in general, but my personal opinion is that certain courses, including the Research course, would be more helpful and impactful if attendance were voluntary. While I greatly appreciate the course for the 110% commitment from Alexandra and Stephen all year long, at the end of the day the second year of masters studies is incredibly heavy and stressful, and having to attend a biweekly course where discussions do not necessarily pertain to an individual's specific project or workload, adds to the stress after a while. Still, I'd like to reiterate I really appreciated our instructors' willingness and support through this course. It was probably the first course in CEMO where students received constant positive feedback and encouragement, and that was a welcome change and much appreciated. Thanks to the instructors for putting in the time and effort to facilitate so many resources and presentations for us throughout the year.”

Summary of student viewpoints and suggestions:

- The majority of comments suggest that the courses instructional approach, with a focus on active group participation, feedback and communication, was a well-received addition to the curriculum.
- Relevance to the thesis work and further on, development of oral communications skills was a plus.
- Refining the alignment between RS1 and RS2 was suggested, in one form or the other, by most students.

Comments from course teachers on the implementation of the course

- There is an obvious dissonance of providing a course intended to be generic at a point in time when students’ main needs focus on their specifics. While this might cause frustration in some, MAE4231 intends to provide the students with a range of approaches. An expectation exchange, as suggested by one student, might help to clarify the different goals of MAE4231 and other activities related to thesis writing.

- Although students felt the need for an in-depth course in course, MAE4231 is designed as a fundamental master course in communicating research skills to larger audiences. Additional resources, on a voluntary basis, like Shut-Up and Write might be a better venue for supporting the students in such a busy and stressful period of writing their thesis.
- Unfortunately, the lockdown measures from mid of march 2020 made it impossible to still run face to face of sessions focussing on professional communication (Poster Session, Elevator Pitch, Symposium). These were immediately implemented through Zoom without any obvious loss in learning objectives.

Proposed changes/comments/measures

This was the first time the course was given, and hence there are no other previous course evaluations to consider. Specific measures that could be easily implemented and hopefully cater better to student needs:

- Giving more resources on academic writing that, altogether, give a broader range of styles of academic papers
- At the same time, this might be overwhelming for some students. Hence, a probable addition might be to pick some good examples of published papers within certain research areas. For instance, 3 "good" papers showing simulation studies vs. 3 "good" papers doing applied measurement research.

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