

Periodic Course Evaluation, spring 2018

HGO4203 Sustainable Urban Transformations

Course coordinator: *Per Gunnar Røe*

Course information

This course aims to explore challenges, transformations and policies related to urban sustainability. Particular emphasis is placed on the social, cultural and spatial aspects of these challenges and policies. The course involves the in-depth analysis of traditional and contemporary theories about urban sustainability and policy transformations. It relates to urbanization and urbanism as a global process, and includes literature, insights and perspectives from different parts of the world, including the global south. The main themes covered by the course are; (1) urban sustainability challenges (emissions, energy, climate and inequality), (2) urban structural transformations (urbanization, land use, infrastructures, energy, spaces and flows), (3) transition in urban practices and cultures (social world views, life styles, practices, institutions and path dependencies), and (4) urban policy transformations (policies, planning and co-creation, global, national and local).

The course offers two study options. There is an internship-based option, available only for students with admission to the master's programme in Human Geography. Because of the limited number of internships, these students have to apply. In addition, there is a desk study option, also open for students from other programmes. The internship option involves a minimum of 10 full working days at a designated work place in the Oslo area, which is active in the field of urban sustainability. The internship will serve as a means of linking theories and knowledge on urban transitions and transformations to sustainability with ongoing policies and practice.

The *knowledge goals* for the course are for the students to be able to;

- account for and discuss key concepts and theories related to urban sustainability
- explain the relations between challenges, transformations and policies

The *skills attainment* goals are to be able to;

- account for, discuss and critique concepts and theories in a sophisticated manner
- connect these theories, and critiques thereof, to specific cases and concrete settings in the field
- write a research paper relating these theories to, either (i) collected data material (qualitative or quantitative), or (ii) specific tasks, practices and policies within specific organizations/institutions working with urban sustainability

General competences are to be able to;

- assess specific situations and challenges involving urban sustainability and sustainable transformations based on theoretically grounded knowledge on this field
- communicate knowledge-based insights and analysis both verbally and in writing
- contribute to the new creative and independent thinking about urban sustainability issues

The teaching in the spring of 2018 consisted of 9 interactive lectures and seminars:

1. Introductory lecture: Key challenges (P. G. Røe)
2. Internship and term paper (P. G. Røe)
3. Smart cities/urban infrastructures (P. G. Røe)
4. Social sustainability/urban commons (P. G. Røe)
5. Mobilities and transport (L. Böcker)
6. Vulnerabilities and resilience (K. O'Brien)
7. Term paper (P. G. Røe)
8. Sustainable transformations (K. O'Brien)
9. Urban metabolism/social practices and interventions (L. Böcker)

In addition the students were offered individual supervision during their work with the term paper.

The syllabus consisted of journal articles and book chapters, a total of 961 pages.

The exam was a research paper addressing a research question related to two of the four themes of the course. The course coordinator assessed and approved the research question, and the empirical basis for the paper within a set deadline (May 16th). The empirical basis for the paper was either (i) collected data or information for the desk study option, or (ii) experience and information gathered during internship for the internship option. The length of the research paper was set to 14-15 pages for the academic option, and 10-11 pages for the internship option (plus notes and references, and using 12 point letter size and a spacing of lines 1 ½).

Course results

18 students registered for exam, and 16 completed exam. The distribution of grades were: A: 1, B: 9, C: 3, D: 2, E: 0, F: 0.

Course evaluation

The course evaluation is based on an online questionnaire, individual interviews with students, and emails from internship hosts (responding to questions sent to them).

In the *questionnaire* the respondents were asked to rate the components of the course using the scale; very good, good, neither, poor, very poor. In addition the respondents could give written feedback. The questionnaire was distributed to all students who completed the course in the spring of 2018. Six (6) students

answered the questionnaire, that is only 37,5% of the number of students who completed exam (16). Therefore the results should be interpreted in combination with the other sources of data.

Four (4) *individual interviews* were conducted by the course coordinator, focusing on the students' experiences with being an internship, but also to get an impression of their experiences with the course in general (teaching, syllabus and exam). In addition two emails were received from *internship hosts*, about their experiences with having students placed in their work environments.

In the following, the main results from the questionnaire and interviews are presented for each of the main components of the course. Special attention is given to the experiences with the internship option since it is the first time this is part of a course in human geography at the department.

Readings/syllabus: Four of the respondents rated the readings as "good", and two as "neither". The interviews supported the impression that the students in general are satisfied. However, the interviews also revealed that some students found the syllabus confusing, because of the way it was organized thematically (and different from the lecture/seminar themes. In the questionnaire the students were asked if they got an understanding of the relations between challenges, transformations and policies. Here there was a range of answers, indicating that some of the students found it difficult to comprehend the linkages between the different themes in the course. This was also said to be a challenge by one of the interviewees.

Lectures: Four of the six respondents rated the lectures as "good", and two as "neither". The interviews seem to support that the students in general are satisfied with the teaching, and with the combination of mini-lectures and discussion. However, one student stated that the students should have been more prepared before the lectures/seminars. Another student said that the students themselves probably didn't work enough with the readings, because of the strong focus on the internship and term paper.

Examination form: There is reason to believe that the students are satisfied with the examination form (term paper). Three respondents gave "very good" as rating, two "good", and one "neither". And the interviewed students seem to like working with the term paper.

Individual follow up: One respondent rated the individual follow up as "very good", four "good" and one "neither". One of the interviewed students commented that the term paper seminar could have focused more on the theme for the paper instead of academic writing in general. However, some students from other master programmes expressed that they needed information about how to write such a paper in human geography. So the needs for this vary amongst students with different backgrounds and training.

Course information: The students responding on the questionnaire seems to be satisfied with the course information. Two students rated this as "very good",

three “good” and one “neither”. None of the interviewees focused on this, except one person who stated that the role of the internship report vs. the term paper could have been explained better.

Internship option: The internship option was available for students (within the Human Geography programme) based on an application process, where the first 12 who applied got an internship. The following organisations, consultancies and institutions offered 1-3 internship places each (12 in total): Plan- og bygningsetaten (the municipality of Oslo), Bane NOR (Norwegian national railway infrastructure.), Rodeo architects, a-lab architects, Smart City Bærum, SoCentral-Pådriv, and ZERO (Zero Emission Resource Organisation). All students with admission to the master’s programme in Human Geography chose the internship option, except one. In addition one student quit the internship (at ZERO) after a couple of days, because of a difference in opinion.

There seem to be a variety of experiences with the internship option. In the questionnaire the answers ranged from “very good” to “neither”. The interviews seem to support the variety of experiences. Some students were very satisfied, because they were well received, were given specific and interesting tasks, and were included socially in the organization. One student also got a three months full time position (competing with approx. 100 applicants) working with urban planning issues. Three students at one of the intership hosts were less satisfied, because they didn’t have enough meetings with their contact persons, and because they worked on projects without much interaction with the employees in the organization. In sum the students were in general satisfied with having the opportunity to be an internship, giving them an opportunity to be part of a relevant work place environment, but how it worked out in practice varied. This is also confirmed by the two internship hosts, who responded on our request to communicate experiences and thoughts. One organisation, who hosted a very satisfied student, was very positive. And the other host organisation, where the students expressed a lack of organization, admitted that they didn’t follow up the internship students sufficiently. The number of days of internship (10 full time days) seems to be sufficient.

Recommendations

Based on the above evaluation, the impression is that this is a course the students in general are satisfied with. They seem to appreciate the combination of urban and sustainability issues, and the internship opportunity, which is unique within Human Geography.

However, some things may be improved. Firstly, the syllabus should be thematically organized in order to match the lectures/seminars. The reason for the mismatch is mainly that the course coordinator decided to reorganize the lectures after the themes in the syllabus was set. The lectures/seminars should be made more interrelated. Some of the texts should also be taken out, because they didn’t fit into the overall structure. A possible way to make the students read more of the literature is to demand a certain percentage of the syllabus to be referred in the term paper.

Secondly, one or two of the internship hosts should be considered taken out. Either the contracts may be terminated, or the course coordinator should improve the communication with the host, in order to secure that the students are included in the organization and are given relevant tasks. This may be achieved through an extra meeting with the internship host at the start of the semester, to clarify expectations and limitations. New internship hosts should also be recruited in order to increase the variety of options for the students. The relationship between the internship report and the term paper should also be clarified.