

Periodic evaluation of the Master`s program in Peace and Conflict Studies (PECOS)

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1. Introduction

In the fall 2020, the Faculty of Social Science initiated an evaluation of the Master`s program in Peace and Conflict Studies (PECOS) as part of the internal system for quality assurance at University of Oslo. The faculty appointed the following persons to the evaluation committee:

- Nina Borgen, Ministry of Defence
- Robin Espeland, student at PECOS
- Håvard Mogleiv Nygård, Norad
- Bjørn Stensaker, LINK (coordinator of the committee)

In the mandate framing the evaluation, the committee was asked to follow the standard procedures for periodic program evaluation as formulated in the internal quality assurance regulations with the purpose to conduct a coherent assessment that ensure and enhance the quality of the program. The mandate also included the relationship between the formal learning objectives set for the program, the organization of teaching and learning activities and the examination forms. It was further stated that the committee should look into whether the program structure and content were integrated and related to the needs of labour market.

The documentation for the periodic evaluation included various statistical data on recruitment, drop-out, and completion, student evaluations of data at course and program level (Studiebarometeret), and a self-evaluation report.

The evaluation committee met with representatives for the students and the academic staff in April 2021, and held separate meetings with the study administration and the program director. The interviews were conducted by video conference, were open and informative, and shed lights on several aspects regarding the current functioning and the plans for further developing the program. The committee would like to thank all the informants and the study administration and leadership for the engagement shown.

PECOS were evaluated as part of the periodic quality assurance system in 2014/15. This evaluation pointed to a number of strengths in the program, but also suggested some changes in internal structuring, pedagogical designs and in the profile of the program (the need to develop a stronger scientific identity).

However, PECOS is a program which currently is under transformation from being a multi-disciplinary program mixing history and political science subjects, to becoming a program solely organized by the Department of Political Science (the last batch of history students admitted into PECOS were admitted in 2018/19). The reason for the transformation is basically that the History department at the Faculty of Humanities developed their own English-language program with an overlapping profile some years ago. After the split with history, the leadership at the Department for Political Science has together with the program council in the department and the program director for PECOS decided to continue the program although with a different academic profile. Additional changes in the program have also been made recently, and further changes are in the pipeline – including a methods reform aiming to streamlining the courses in the program.

Acknowledging the process of transformation currently taking place, the committee has decided to prioritize a forward-looking perspective in the current evaluation. While the current functioning of the program indeed has informed our assessment and provided valuable insights

into the teaching and learning activities taking place, we see the current evaluation as playing a more important role if the report also can address some of the suggested future directions of PECOS. Moreover, we have carried out this evaluation at the end of what has been a very demanding year for students, faculty, and administrative staff. By and large, students have not been able to meet face-to-face throughout the year because of pandemic related restrictions, many international students are studying from their native countries and have not travelled to Oslo, and lecturing has been virtual. Inevitably, students', faculty, and staff' experiences over the last year influences their own evaluations and views on the PECOS program. We stress, however, that this is not an evaluation of how PECOS had handled Covid-19, to the extent possible we have therefore tried to bracket and look beyond the immediate effects of the pandemic.

Our main conclusion is that PECOS currently is developing in a positive way, and that the program could be very important in the future profiling of the Department of Political Science.

2. The current functioning of the PECOS program

2.1 Recruitment, admission and the start-up as a student

With respect to the share number of applicants, PECOS is doing very well with around 800 students applying for the program in 2020 (20 slots available). There are no signs that the facing out of the multi-disciplinary profile of the program has resulted in fewer applicants. Grade average to be admitted is also high, and above average for comparable social science programs at the faculty. Hence, the program is very attractive and seems to enjoy a lot of interest both from Norwegian and international students.

A number of applicants are foreign students, but fewer foreign students are admitted to the program due to a tendency of “no-show”/decline to accept by the foreign applicants. The department has implemented compensatory actions as a response to this situation, and the committee do think that the current routines for admission makes sense. The “no-show”/decline tendency reported could also be affected by the Covid-19 pandemic which created a number of challenges for international students.

PECOS attracts many international students that have high expectations and who are highly skilled and motivated. The students also have quite diverse expectations about what PECOS is all about. Both teachers and the students the committee interacted with indicate that there is considerable tacit knowledge circulating about the program, and the expectations facing students when they are admitted to the program. Some students complain about difficulties acquiring the information needed as it is spread through different channels and formats (email, webpages, Canvas, etc.). The committee interprets this as partly being related to general difficulties when entering into university studies in another country with different academic traditions. Another possible explanation is the ongoing reform process where ambitions have not yet manifested themselves into practice. However, whatever the cause the program does seem to have a challenge clearly formulating expectations to the students at PECOS.

2.2 Learning outcomes and the current academic profile of the program

The current learning outcomes are clearly specified at the PECOS webpage, and reflect the transition of the program from having a multi-disciplinary orientation towards being closer to political science/international relations. The learning outcomes have been subject to change following the split between history and political science, and the evaluation committee was also informed that further changes will be made as the program develops.

Our interpretation of the learning outcomes is that they reflect the current methodological and analytical profile of the program where a number of the items specified have this focus. Several of the students the committee interviewed expressed positive views on this strong emphasis on methods/analytical tools and underlined that the strong analytical profile of the program was key when applying for the program.

The committee notices that a number of quite detailed outcomes are specified for “skills” and “competence”, but there is less detail offered regarding “knowledge”. The committee also notice that there are no learning outcomes specified with respect to collaboration skills, leadership, etc. We also question whether a student after completing a master degree should only be capable of applying “basic” principles of research design. As such, we argue that not all learning outcomes are described at a level expected for master students and the academic profile of the programme.

2.3 Program structure

The current program structure is basically organized along 10 study point modules (emner) which are adapted to the general module structure at the Department for Political Science. First semester is focusing on introducing students to research methods and analytical tools, while the second semester is more oriented towards substantive and elective modules. In the second year of the program much time is allocated to master thesis work, and with a special thesis seminar being offered along with yet another possibility to add an elective course. As such, the program structure reflects well the learning outcomes specified aiming at providing students with more in-depth knowledge on methodology and analytical tools.

The committee was informed that the program structure is being transformed, and that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused some challenges in realising the current ambitions. The committee's assessment of the functioning of the current structure is that there in general is a good balance in the program regarding mandatory and elective courses. A potential problem with respect to elective courses is the fact that the Department of Political Science has organized their courses in ways (six week intensive modules) that could be problematic for students wanting courses from other departments/faculties having a different structural set-up for their courses (full semester courses). The range of courses within the departments seems highly relevant for the PECOS students though. Currently, there is a trade-off between the student's freedom of choice and how this is balanced against a clear programme profile. As such, there seems to be a potential to cultivate further the PECOS identity.

During interviews with students, comments on the program structure were mainly related to the lack of a “red thread” during the semesters as the focus on methods and analytical tools in the first semester were more absent during the second semester, and where the design seminar had

an unclear status among the students. Here we also note that students in general expressed high levels of satisfaction with the methods training offered at PECOS. They were concerned that in later courses they were not asked to or were not able to use and practice these skills. This seems to result in students having to review and relearn things when starting to write on their thesis.

The teachers underlined the importance of the design seminar as a way of pushing students into starting the work on the thesis, but based on the feedback received from the students it is questionable whether the current lay-out of this seminar is successful. The committee does see the relevance of having transitional tools in place to assist the students in the start-up of their thesis. As such, the relevance of a “design seminar” is surely there. Our question is more about whether this module has a content that helps the students in this transition. The committee is informed about changes in the layout and organization of the design seminar – building more structure and having more instructors present. These changes may address some of the existing challenges of the design seminar.

The students were also quite pleased with the content of the courses offered in methods/analytical tools in the first semester, and the committee does see the relevance of having an early introduction to a core element of the program. Doing this early one may also help to bringing the students with different backgrounds together.

Beyond the two methods courses, PECOS4021 (*Research Methods*) and PECOS4022 (*Applied Statistics for Peace and Conflict Studies*), the students must select one out of two PECOS core courses. These are also open to master’s students outside the PECOS program. PECOS4010 (*Conflict and State Building*) follows the two method courses at the end of the first semester. In the response to the 2015 evaluation, it was stated that this course was in need of reform. The committee understands that this has been successful, and that the course offers the students an opportunity to apply the tools and knowledge obtained from PECOS4021 and 4022 in a more coherent fashion. Furthermore, as this course is now at the end of the semester (compared to its previous position in between the method courses), the students have a more natural progression. PECOS4110 (*International Negotiations/Conflict Resolution*) maintains its popular status among the students. This course has had an ‘applied’ focus, and the only course that does not follow traditional evaluation procedures (written exam/paper). Rather, in addition to a term paper, the students have participated in a negotiation simulation exercise; followed by an oral examination. Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 situation, PECOS4110 could not be carried out as usual in the 2020, as it is contingent on the physical presence of the students and will therefore not be offered in the spring of 2021. The committee sees the return of this course (or equivalent) in the future as important. It offers the students an opportunity for applying their knowledge in a way no other course does; it has obviously enjoyed success in the past, and it does not appear to break with the current vision for the future of PECOS.

2.4 Teaching methods and student learning

The self-evaluation report is not very explicit on teaching methods and thoughts about how to best organize the teaching activities. Based on the evidence provided, the different courses are thought in a rather traditional mode, with lecturing being a dominant activity, although on-line and digital formats have been introduced due to the Covid-19 situation. While lecturing indeed is a relevant form of teaching, it is a bit surprising how much emphasis that currently seems to

be put on this form of teaching. As the group of students seems both highly motivated and resourceful, alternative formats that could engage and activate students are a bit missing. An exception is the course in “international negotiations/conflict resolution” where students are exposed to a simulation exercise. The committee do see this as a praiseworthy initiative, which have also received positive feedback from the students.

In the self-evaluation report it is stated that few students reply to student evaluation activities, including the national “Studiebarometeret”. It was also reported that there is a lack of systematic interaction between the program leadership and the students – historically such interactions seemed more need-based. The committee do acknowledge the wisdom in adapting evaluation methods to the fact that there are few students in the program. Conducting quantitative surveys few students respond to can indeed be a waste of time. The committee is also under the impression that much communication is informal and that it is relatively easy for the students to let their voices be heard (not least in relation to the study administration). The current leadership in the program has taken initiatives to improve communication with students, reportedly with difficulties to engage the student in these activities. However, one could argue that there are still room for improvements in the ways the leadership and the students interact.

During the latter year, a lot of teaching have been moved on-line, and Zoom seems to have been the key platform in use. The program is also using Canvas as the main platform sharing resources and provide info about the course design. While Zoom and Canvas indeed are in use, the committee has not seen examples of more sophisticated integration of the different digital tools available, encouraging more student interaction and forming a more dynamic learning environment. The set-up of a separate Zoom room for students enabling more informal interaction between the students is an initiative the committee think has merit. However, the digitalization of the teaching seems to a large extent to be delegated to the individual teacher, with less overarching initiatives taken to develop a more integrated digital learning environment for the students.

An interesting characteristic of PECOS is the possibility to do an internship at a relevant external organization as part of a course. Many students do use this opportunity, and many students seems to benefit from this opportunity as well. Such internships are both an opportunity to offer valuable connections the working life and to develop other and more practical skill sets for the students. The committee think that integrating internships as part of the program is a strength, and a very praiseworthy initiative. At the same time, we heard some concerns that getting an internship may be more problematic for international students that perhaps has a less extensive personal network.

There are few students in PECOS, and as such it is perhaps no surprise that many students also report about that it is relatively easy to get to know each other, and that there is a inclusive atmosphere in the program. The possibility to meet up physically has been a severe problem during the pandemic, and the fact that the building where the program is located is to undergo renovation is a major concern for the students as they have no longer access to a specific physical meeting space. As much interaction is digital, having the possibility for face-to-face meetings is considered crucial for the students.

2.5 Examination methods, results and study progress

Except for the previously mentioned PECOS 4110 (International negotiations/conflict resolution), much of the examination format in PECOS is quite traditional where “school-type written exams” dominate. Given the skill sets and competencies identified in the learning outcome descriptions of the program, there are few examples of how examination formats may (for example) stimulate “independent and qualified assessment of other people’s work, give constructive feedback” as it is formulated the program description.

The overall results in the program are quite good as measured by the grade students receive when graduating. The majority of the students receive an A or a B on their thesis. More historical data show that 3 out of 4 students complete their Master degree within 8 semesters. More recent data do not show an improvement where only 50 percent of the students finished within two-year schedule. The committee do think this is an issue for concern, and although there might be good explanations for the delay in completion (extracurricular activities, paid work, difficulties adjusting to Norwegian culture and ways of doing things), there may be reasons to ask whether some program activities (including the design seminar which is intended to kick-start the thesis work) is functioning as planned.

The committee is under the impression that PECOS is a well-known program by relevant employers in Norway, not least due to the previously mentioned internship program. Whether the internship program also is of value to ease the transition into getting a job after completing the study is more uncertain. Having such links is undoubtedly an advantage, and as such it is also a problem that many international students – even though all students are eligible for it - are not exposed to the opportunities of the internship model.

Graduates of the PECOS program seems to end up in a wide variety of jobs, which speaks to both the diversity of interest within the relatively small student body and to the potential of a future PECOS alumni network. While there does not exist a systematic overview, to the committee’s knowledge, graduates have continued to PhD-studies, work in ministries and directorates, NGOs, think tanks, politics, media and various parts of the private sector. This employment profile do seem relevant to the current profile of the program as former PECOS students become researchers, analysts, administrators, journalists, advisors, diplomats, etc.

A former PECOS-student was recently nominated for an Academy Award and made an appearance at a PECOS Practitioner’s Perspective during the spring 2021 semester; this serves as a good example of how current students can connect with former students.

2.6 Other issues

PECOS does not seem to face particular issues regarding staff resources at the moment. The teachers associated to the program have an academic profile that fits the program and they seem motivated and engaged as well. Students are not complaining about administrative issues (apart from the communication issues highlighted earlier).

3. Conclusion and recommendations

The current evaluation has been undertaken as PECOS is in the midst of a transition as a program, and where it is being re-profiled under the new program leadership. As part of this

transition, the committee is also familiar with the plans to reform the whole methods training at department level (for all program offerings). Both in the self-evaluation report and during our meeting with the program director, the future identity of the program is quite clear regarding its academic identity and the qualifications acquired by the students admitted to the program.

While the committee does think the former PECOS program had interesting ambitions with respect to combining history and political science, we do think that a more political science oriented program having a strong profile in methods and analytical skills will be a way to secure high academic standards as well as working life relevance also in the future. Hence, the committee very much support the new direction of PECOS and the plans sketched out by the current program leadership. This acknowledgement form the basis for our recommendations.

In the further development of the program, it is important that the current strengths of the program are maintained. These strengths include a good reputation – also internationally – providing the program with a high number of qualified applicants; a thematic profile focusing on methods and analytical skills that current students perceive as attractive; a qualified staff matching the program profile; and the internship model offering students a link to working life, and to develop and practice different skill sets.

There is nevertheless also room for improvement in PECOS, and based on the documentation and the interviews conducted we would argue that the program need to clarify expectations towards the students, and to be more explicit about its working for incoming students. The committee also think that current teaching methods are not matching some of the learning outcomes specified, and that examination of students is not testing the range of skill sets and competencies identified in the program. We specify our recommendations more in details below:

- The current learning outcomes of the program reflect the academic profile and the emphasis on methodology and analytical skills. Given the high academic ambitions sketched out, we would recommend that the weight given to excellence is clearly reflected in the learning outcomes. As an international academic program focusing on international students, it may be useful to look into the European qualification framework with respect to identifying adequate levels and skill sets. The committee also think that other competencies could be considered included in the descriptions, including collaboration, leadership, initiative, ability to work independently etc.
- The committee would also strongly encourage PECOS to clarify more explicitly the expectations directed at students in the program. As many students are international and have a diverse background, it is important that the program is meeting students early with adequate information, and that the ways of working in the program is introduced early on. As part of this process, we would also recommend that the teachers attached to the program come together in the process of defining such expectations so that practice is similar across different courses.
- While the committee is very positive with respect to the renewed academic profile of PECOS, we do see that the emphasis on methodology and analytical skills could be better integrated into the overall program structure – creating a clearer “red thread” throughout the program. This might imply that such skills are repeated and “built-into” various formats and courses, and that the courses encourage various adaptation of skills and competencies in the different courses offered. As part of this process, we would also

recommend that the current design course providing a transition into the master thesis is looked into with the purpose of “kick-starting” the thesis work. We understand that there are plans already underway to change the design course in this direction.

- As digitalization is here to stay, but where teaching and learning probably will take place in more hybrid formats in the future, the committee would underline the many possibilities that exist in Canvas to create a clearer study structure for the students – assisting them as they navigate through different learning assignments. It is our impression that digital competence building is rather individualized, and that a more collective approach creating more coherent digital designs would benefit both the teachers and the students.
- Given the current and possible reformed learning outcome descriptions, we would also recommend the program to be more innovative regarding the teaching methods and student learning activities. The committee do think that simulation activities as exemplified in the current course PECOS 4110 may provide inspiration for other types of experimentation which can engage and activate students in line with the thematic profile of PECOS. As part of this process, we would also argue for a renewal of examination methods allowing for more collaborative formats, portfolio assessments, and formats that test the various learning outcomes specified for the program. This is not to say that traditional “school-exams” are irrelevant, but that such formats could and should be complemented. Such development would be dependent on the involvement of the teachers and also systematic discussions among the teachers securing diversity in methods and formats adjusted to the course portfolio.
- The committee is impressed by the internship model in PECOS and do see various ways in which this activity could be developed. We do support the initiative from the program leader facilitating more “Practitioner perspectives” as part of strengthening the links to relevant employers and challenges graduates may face later. But if this is intended as a voluntary activity it also needs to be communicated more clearly early on that involvement is part of the expected duties of students, and that this is essential for the learning environment etc. The committee do see the potential of “Practitioner perspectives” as a mandatory activity as well, although this would probably require a different organization of the activity. The practitioner perspectives could also be a way for employers to introduce topics and issues that could be relevant for students regarding their master thesis which probably would stimulate more interest. The PECOS program probably also has an interesting portfolio of alumni that could be linked to this initiative, again providing new links to the working life and ideas for master thesis topics. As such, prioritising the establishment of an alumni network is something the program leadership should consider.
- The committee is impressed by the students the PECOS program attracts and the care and thought the programme leadership has put into setting up an attractive and ambitious study program. The PECOS program by its very nature speaks to issues that are always high up on political agendas and the programme leadership has gone to great lengths to ensure that the program is both academically of the highest quality while at the same time ensuring that it speaks to and connects with the applied and policy world. Here the committee believes the Department of Political Science, the Faculty of Social Sciences and the University should be more cognizant of their role in featuring the programme

and ensuring that it receives the focus and profiling it deserves. At present, this does not appear to be the case.

- Both students and faculty noted in interviews that the PECOS student group is a highly cohesive and integrated group. This has to a large extent been facilitated by the dedicated ‘lounge area’ PECOS students enjoy, an area characterised by faculty as always buzzing with activity and collaboration. This physical space, as we understand, will be removed as part of the larger renovation of the Social Sciences Faculty building. This is concerning and an issue we hope has been properly deliberated as part of renovation planning.
- Faculty noted that PECOS generally attracts top students from across the globe. There are issues, however, with attracting sufficiently qualified students from parts of the world, in particular Middle East, Africa, and Southern Asia. Faculty argues that this is a result of the requirement that students hold a BA in political science to be eligible for the program. In many of these countries, however, BA programs in political science are generally weak and the best students instead pursue BAs in natural science topics. Comparable programs to PECOS across the best universities in the world do not require BAs in political science for admittance but instead place greater emphasis on alternative ways to demonstrate motivation and qualifications. The committee is well aware of the added work load associated with alternative admission approaches, the challenges such approaches imply for the comparative assessment of candidates, and issues related to ensuring a more standardized knowledge base for the students in the program. Given the international orientation of the PECOS program, such alternative application processes and requirements should nevertheless be part of the discussion regarding the further development of the program.
- As PECOS still have issues with the number of students who graduate ‘on time’ (two years), the committee appreciates the plan of restructuring the current PECOS4081 (*Design Seminar*) as this might help in addressing this challenge. However, completion of the program on time is also highly conditioned by the way supervision and the supervision process is organized. As the students have expressed concern regarding thesis supervision and follow-up, the committee do see room for improvement regarding the relationship between the supervisor and the individual student. Currently, PECOS students can apply for a supervisor, internal or external, at their choosing. This model may have advantages as students are the ones ‘choosing’, but for international students not familiar with this system, one also run the risk of being delayed if the individual students have challenges in landing a supervisor. It can also be questioned whether the students have adequate knowledge of the competence of all potential supervisors. Hence, the program should consider ways to facilitate the matching between students and supervisors at an earlier stage, for example by allowing for an earlier and perhaps a more informal ‘kick-off’ of the thesis process. The program should also ensure that existing supervision processes are running in satisfactory ways, for example by various forms of status checks performed by the administration in order to pick up on issues along the way. The committee is aware that Covid-19 related issues may have negatively impacted supervision processes, but because the statistics of ‘on time’-graduates have not changed substantially since the last evaluation, the ways in which supervision is organized and practices should be addressed.