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Mottagare:

Humanistiska fakultetsstyrelsen

Åtgärdsplan för huvudområdet Religionsvetenskap och teologi samt Teologiskt program, kandidatprogram på grundnivå, vid institutionen för litteratur, idéhistoria och religion

Introduction

As part of GU's *Policy för kvalitetssäkring och kvatitetsutveckling* (2016), a review of teaching in Religious Studies and Theology was conducted during the academic year 2020/21. The evaluation was carried out by a group of external evaluators comprised of Peter Nynäs, Johanna Gustafsson Lundberg, and Felicia Åstrand. This group reviewed faculty qualifications together with key course and program documents, and also conducted interviews with faculty and groups of student representatives. They submitted their report on 17 May 2021.

The evaluators' overall assessment of teaching in Religious Studies and Theology was positive: 'Bedömargruppens sammanfattande uppfattning är att huvudområdet

religionsvetenskap och teologi och teologiskt program vid humanistiska fakulteten håller en jämn och hög nivå. Den karaktäriseras av en genomtänkt struktur som garanterar vad som kan förväntas av områden men denna typ av intern bredd' (*Bedömarutlåtande*, p. 8). However, the evaluators did point to several areas in which improvement is possible. In accordance with the Faculty of Humanity's *Vägledning för utbildningsutvärdering på grundnivå och avancerad nivå med extern bedömning 2017– 2023*, the Department for Literature, History of Ideas and Religion has prepared the following action plan in response to their comments. The plan identifies six areas in which the evaluators indicated either need or possibility for improvement, and the steps that we will take in response.

1. Communication with students

Examiners identified shortcomings in clear communication with students both on a general level, and in three areas in particular: explanations of (i) what evaluation criteria will be used for particular assignments; (ii) why English is used in second-cycle courses; and (iii) what support is available to students with disabilities. Regarding general shortcomings, they write, for instance: 'I samband med intervjuerna framkom därtill att en möjlig otydlighet i kommunikationen mellan lärare och studerande kan bidra till att försvåra att lärandemål uppnås, viss otydligheter riskerar därmed att leda studenterna fel i lärandeprocessen och examination' (p. 3). Regarding more specific issues like the use of English in some masters dissertations and support for students with disabilities, they write, for instance: 'Här rekommenderar bedömargruppen större förtydliganden vad (sic) och varför engelska förespråkas' (p. 4). 'För studerandena var det oklart om blindskrift och teckenstöd i föreläsningar, material och kurslitteratur finns att tillgå för de som har denna typ av behov. De var inte medvetna om att studenter som har denna typ av behov kan vända sig till GU:s "Samordnare för pedagogiskt stöd"' (p. 7).

Response

Our view is that perhaps the most significant contributor to communication failures is different and sometimes inconsistent practices in making information available through Canvas. In order to improve, we will develop a standard template for course guides during VT22 that will be used in all of our courses beginning in HT22. Course guides that follow this structure will be available through Canvas for each course. They will present one central place to which students can go in order to find key course information.

The precise form of the template will be determined through collegial discussion: a draft will be developed by our pedagogiska styrgrupp, and will be presented to all faculty and set in its final form at one of our regular staff meetings. At a minimum, the template will include the following information:

(i) Dates and times for all course sessions, together with expectations regarding preparation for each session (e.g., what literature is to be read).

(ii) Assignment and examination dates and details, together with a specification of the kind of feedback students can expect and an indication of the most essential assessment criteria.

(iii) Language of instruction. Most of our formal kursplaner leave room for courses to be taught in either English or Swedish (e.g., the kursplaner for all of our second-cycle courses specify that English is the primary language of instruction because second-cycle courses are intended to reach an international audience, but that Swedish may be used if all students are Swedish speaking). The course guide will specify which language will be used. Where English appears, the course guide will remind students that UKÄ guidelines give them the right to be examined in Swedish if they wish, and will also direct them to campus resources and guidebooks that offer assistance with academic English, since faculty do not have time to function as language tutors alongside their other responsibilities.

(iv) Support that is available to students with disabilities (the guide will, e.g., indicate that students may contact GU's 'Samordnare för pedagogiskt stöd'.)

(v) Summary of the most important points of student feedback received on previous versions of the course, and faculty response to those matters (cf. point 3 below).

2. Engagement with students in online courses

Evaluators identified inconsistent practices in contact with students in online courses, both in terms of opportunities to discuss material with faculty, and in terms of responses to assignments. The evaluators identify this inconsistency as a potential contributor to weak completion rates in online courses in particular. They write, for instance: 'Interaktionen mellan lärare och studerande har ersatts med digitala forum där studenterna uppmanas att reflektera och diskutera sinsemellan, samt förinspelade föreläsningar' (p. 4). 'De frågetecken som uppkommit rör den omställning (sic) under pandemin till digital undervisning och upplevelsen hos studenter av bristande respons på inlämningsuppgifter' (p. 4).

Response

Our view is that this issue has a threefold cause: (i) insufficient time available to faculty to engage with students to the degree that would be ideal; (ii) lack of clarity and consensus amongst faculty about the best way in which to teach online courses; and (iii) lack of clarity in communicating with students about what kind of interactions and responses students can expect. In response, we will:

(i) Provide 10 more working hours for faculty who teach courses that run in parallel both on campus and online so long as, on average, at least six students have registered over the last three years (see further point 5.iii below). The primary cause of occasional lapses in engagement with online students is the limited time that is available to faculty members to teach each course. Several years ago, our courses began running in parallel on campus and online with no additional time given in order to offset the added work of engaging with online students. A further 10 hours remains insufficient compensation for the added work of balancing on campus and online sections of a course, but it is the limit of what is possible given the budgets that typify disciplines within the humanities. The extra hours will be used for the increased workload of providing individual feedback in courses with many students; they are not meant to create a situation where the amount of hours for lectures and seminars is made dependent on the number of students enrolled.

(ii) Develop a consistent set of expectations about the teacher contact time that online courses will involve. This will be done with attention to a balance of available faculty time, and student expectation and need. It will specify a minimum level of contact time that students can expect (e.g., one live Zoom seminar per week), but will also leave some flexibility in order to accommodate the preferences that faculty have developed for particular practices in online teaching. The pedagogiska styrgrupp will develop a proposal early in VT22 that will be set in its final form in a subsequent meeting of the full staff.

(iii) Include in the course guide for each course clear descriptions of the contact time and the timing and form of the feedback that students can expect. Our experience has been that students are usually very happy with the contact time and assignment responses that they receive, so long as it has been clear from the beginning just what those times and responses will look like.

3. Student influence

The examiners note a deficit in the influence that students have on our education. They express particular concern about inconsistencies in the use of course evaluations, and inadequacies in informing students about how courses have been changed in response to their feedback. The examiners write, for instance: 'Bedömargruppen oroas över studenternas upplevelse av att det finns en avsaknad på inflytande i planerandet, genomförandet och uppföljningen av utbildningen. Det främsta redskapet betraktas vara kursvärderingarna som ofta, men långt ifrån alltid, skickas ut vid kursens avslutande' (p. 6).

Response

Two steps are important to our response:

(i) Beginning in HT21 we will use the new course evaluation tool in Canvas to conduct evaluations in every class. A significant issue that has prevented consistent use of course evaluations has been the lack of an effective tool for conducting course evaluations in online courses. Use of the new Canvas tool will produce significant improvement.

(ii) Beginning in HT22 the new course guides that we will use (see point 1, above) will include a section that identifies the most significant points of student feedback from the previous version of the course, and an indication of what has been done in response.

4. Relevance and skills training

The evaluators suggested that, though questions regarding the relevance of an education in the humanities are hardly distinctive to teaching in religion and theology at GU, we would benefit from thinking further about a few interrelated areas. As a first matter, we could think more about how to present the relevance of our education. As a second, we could improve the degree to which we train students in generic academic skills that they can employ in their careers. As a third, one aspect of generic skills that requires further attention is the degree to which we prepare students to work with academic methods

and theories. In describing these issues, the examiners write, for instance: 'för den som varken vill bli lärare eller präst är det svårt att riktigt se relevansen av den här typen av studier' (p. 5). 'Vad gäller olika aspekter av forskningsmetodik väcks däremot vissa frågor om vilka aspekter av metod man betonar, hur man hanterar progressionen kring denna och hur den är integrerad i utbildningen' (p. 4).

Response

Two elements are central to our response:

(i) We will build up a network of alumni mentors who provide examples for students of the kinds of careers that are open to them after their studies, and are available to students to answer questions about their careers. This will involve two elements. (a) Beginning in VT22, we will ask graduating students if they would be willing to be part of an alumni mentor network, and will then stay in touch with those who agree to take part (e.g., a group email once a year in order to see if they have changed professions, to monitor the activity of the network, and to keep contact information up to date). (b) Beginning in HT22, we will provide information about these alumni mentors to incoming students so that new students can see examples of potential careers and people they can contact if they have questions.

(ii) Beginning in HT21, the Studierektor has instituted a practice of meeting once a term with the faculty in each of the five disciplines within religion and theology in order to discuss education in that area. Key points of discussion in the first round of meetings included identifying the scientific methods and generic academic competences that are most important in each area, and developing a plan for building progressive development of these skills into our courses. In systematic theology, e.g., faculty agreed that every fortsättningsnivå course should include a literature review assignment, and every fördjupningsnivå course should include an exercise in writing a statement of academic method. Following up on and further developing these plans will be a central function of meetings between the Studierektor and faculty in different areas going forwards.

5. Pressure on faculty

The examiners suggested that some of the inconsistencies identified above in, e.g., communication and contact with students, might be attributable to excessive pressure on faculty. Two sources of pressure were identified: insufficient working time for each course; and having to teach in a large range of different areas. The examiners write, for instance: 'Här uppfattar bedömargruppen att ett problem är bristande resurser i form av tilldelningen i timmar per kurs, där tiden inte verkat räcka till varken (sic) för kontinuerlig feed back och i en del fall inte heller till några möten i realtid' (pp. 4-5).

Response

The examiners are right to note that limited budgets in Faculties of Humanities around the world entail that pressure on faculty members' time is not a problem that is distinctive to work in religion and theology. Within our existing budget there are limits to the measures that we can implement. There are, however, a few steps that we are actively taking:

(i) Over the last two years we have developed new general interest courses that have been remarkably popular as summer courses. We are currently developing a rotation of general interest courses that can be offered during summers and online during terms with the aim of anchoring a stable long-term budget that allows additional hours to be added to other courses.

(ii) We will begin offering 10 extra working hours to faculty members whenever they are teaching a course that is new for them.

(iii) Because, after Covid, we will be returning to having courses run in parallel both on campus and online, we will add 10 working hours to every course that includes online and campus sections so long as at least six students have registered on average over the last three years (cf. point 2.i above).

(iv) Sharply limited numbers of teaching hours are particularly acute at the second-cycle level, which creates considerable awkwardness because second-cycle courses are some of our most popular. In order to improve this imbalance, we will add 10 working hours to every second-cycle course that has had at least nine students finish the course on average over the last three years.

(iv) With a view to minimizing the degree to which faculty teach courses that fall outside of their primary areas of expertise, part of the meeting each term between the Studierektor and faculty in our different areas will include consultation about which courses we are offering, and which courses faculty are most comfortable teaching.

6. Culture of individualism

The examiners note a tendency towards individualism in our culture that inhibits effective planning and development. They note that things like development of new courses, choice of literature, identification of appropriate assignments, and selection of grading criteria are usually matters of individual choice. They write, for instance: 'Bedömargruppen menar att det för att kunna driva utvecklingsarbete mer på djupet skulle ett mer tydligt kollegialt gemensamt grepp behöva tas kring allt från frågor som rör pedagogisk utveckling, synen på examinationer, till frågor om vad som kännetecknar religions- och teologistudier i Göteborg' (p. 7).

Response

The examiners are right to indicate that faculty enjoy a high level of autonomy in determining how to run their courses. On one level, our view is that this is more of a strength than a weakness: developing courses and choosing literature that fit particular faculty member's strengths allows them to deliver high quality courses that do not come with the pressure of mastering unfamiliar material (cf. point 5 above). However, the evaluators are right to suggest that a culture of individualism can inhibit long-term planning and development, and create inconsistencies in, e.g., grading practices. We therefore propose the following steps:

(i) Meetings between the Studierektor and faculty in each area will include review of long-term course offerings and strategies based in review of student numbers in each course. Reviews of this kind in HT21 have already led, e.g., to a decision to synthesise

two struggling second-cycle method courses into one, and to replace two unpopular second-cycle courses with a new one that extends a topic treated in a popular course.

(ii) The use of a standardized course guide for each course will produce more consistency across grading practices because it will include specification of the most important grading criteria for each assignment.

(iii) We will organize a staff day in August 2022 that will focus on some of the questions posed by the examiners: (a) What do we see as the most important goals of our education? (b) What would we like to have as the distinguishing features of education in religion and theology at GU? (iii) How can we shape our programs and courses in order to reflect these goals and priorities?

Summary of steps to be taken:

ACTION	SCHEDULE	RESPONSIBILITY
Ensure clarity of communication with students by creating a standard template for all course guides so that students have one source in which they can find all necessary course information.	Development: VT22 Implementation: HT22	Studierektor in cooperation first with the pedagogiska styrgrupp and secondly with the ämneskollegium.

ACTION	SCHEDULE	RESPONSIBILITY
Ensure that students in online courses receive adequate contact time with faculty by developing guidelines for minimum acceptable contact time in each course.	Development: VT22 Implementation: HT22	Studierektor in cooperation first with the pedagogiska styrgrupp and secondly with the ämneskollegium.

ACTION	SCHEDULE	RESPONSIBILITY
Ensure consistency in the use of course evaluations and in communication of faculty responses by using the new Canvas tool for course evaluations in all courses, and including summaries of the most important points of student feedback and of faculty	Use of new Canvas tool: from HT21. Summary of feedback and response in course guides: from HT22	All faculty

responses in our new course guides.		

ACTION	SCHEDULE	RESPONSIBILITY
Ensure that students receive information about the career paths that are open to them by creating a network of alumni who can serve as examples of possible careers and informal mentors to students.	Creation of network: VT22 Introduction to new students and continuous monitoring: from HT22	Program coordinators and Studievägledare

ACTION	SCHEDULE	RESPONSIBILITY
Continue meetings once a term between the Studierektor and faculty in each area in order to ensure that: (i) academic methods and general academic skills are being taught in logical progression across our courses; and (ii) faculty have input on their course assignments so that, e.g., they are not burdened with a high number of new courses.	From HT21	Studierektor

ACTION	SCHEDULE	RESPONSIBILITY
Improve faculty workloads by adding further teaching hours to each course in proportion with, e.g., student numbers and the frequency with which a faculty member has taught a course.	From VT22	Studierektor

ACTION	SCHEDULE	RESPONSIBILITY
Develop a sense of departmental identity and resist a culture of individualism by	August 2022	Studierektor and VP för utbildning.

arranging a staff day to discuss long term goals and plans.		