

## **Evaluation of the BA programme in Egyptology at Uppsala University, 22-23 October 2019**

### *Introduction*

The board of reviewers for assessing the BA program in Egyptology at Uppsala University consisted of three members: Fredrik Norland Hagen, Richard Bussmann, and Cecilia Wassén. Two of the board members speak Swedish. The student representative was unfortunately sick and did not attend the meetings.

Overall, we are very pleased with the information that we have received in good time prior to the meeting in Uppsala. The file contains information from the Faculty of Arts at Uppsala University with a summary of the general model for the evaluation procedures in English (“Course evaluation at the Faculty of Arts, Uppsala University 2019: Information to the board of reviewers”) and the full length instruction in Swedish, “Riktlinjer för Uppsala universitets modell för utbildnings-värderingar”.

We appreciate the detailed and extensive Self-assessment report that provides a thorough introduction to the program in Egyptology at the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History. The document lists the enrolment of the students since 2012 and explains the funding for the program. It explains the structure of the Egyptology courses A to D and its place within the structure of the BA program in Archaeology and Ancient History when students choose Egyptology as their main field of study. Nevertheless, the fact that Year 1 (the base year) is not compulsory was not evident for us initially. The description of the courses and how they relate to each other in the Self-assessment report is highly informative, highlighting both strengths as weaknesses. It also outlines specific challenges that the program has experienced in the past, due to the shortness of permanent faculty, and provides plans for the future. We congratulate the authors of the document on this detailed and informative description.

The files we received include syllabi for all the courses in Egyptology at the A-C level, summaries of the result of many student course evaluations, and several examples of assignments as well as reading dossiers containing texts for students to study. The files as a whole provide valuable information into the specifics of the courses. Unfortunately, the syllabi and most of the student evaluations are in Swedish only, which of course makes the content inaccessible to the non-Swedish speaker on the panel. We found the information on the syllabi very general, including the details concerning examination. In our interviews, the teachers referred to “Welcome letters”, which are made available to students on the website for the courses, “Studentportalen”. They also post other forms of detailed information to students on this website, such as the schedule for readings and examination. We would have liked to get these documents in advance. Furthermore, we missed the reading lists accompanying the syllabi. A link to the department’s website would also have been useful.

The written material outlined above was complemented by on-site interviews with management, teachers and students during our visit to the department on 22-23 October 2019. The structure of the interviews worked very well. The initial interview with the director of studies, Michael Lindblom, the head of the department, Susanne Carlsson, and the professor of Egyptology Andreas Dorn gave us the opportunity to understand the department as a whole and the different programs. This was followed by a conversation with three teachers and subsequently by a meeting with four students. The students were happy to share their experiences of the program in Egyptology with us and to answer all the questions we had. Taken together the written information and the scheduled meetings have given us sufficient information for us to be able to evaluate Egyptology according to the questions we have been asked to address.

### *Quality*

The quality of the education is very good. Students are exposed to a representative range of topics in Egyptology, acquiring skills in Egyptian philology, archaeology and history. The level of exams compares internationally to other departments. The exams offer sufficient challenges for strong students to excel. The dissertations reflect a high degree of competence in the field of Egyptology. Some BA dissertations were clearly of a very high standard, reflecting a high quality of teaching and supervision offered to students.

### *Strengths and weaknesses*

Egyptology at Uppsala University is currently developing a very strong representation in the field of Egyptology, raising the number of members of staff/teachers from one to three full-time permanent positions, an additional tenured position and two PhD positions. The teachers of the Egyptology program are internationally recognized researchers in their field and excellently qualified to train students at a high, research-led level. They have complementary expertise in the fields of philology, history and archaeology, which ensures that students will benefit from a broad range of skills.

The subject benefits from a first-class collection of objects from Egypt and Nubia in the Gustavianum. The collection offers excellent opportunities for teaching and future research. Current teaching makes very good use of the collection in classes based on object handling, offered in the courses Egyptian Archaeology and Material Culture. The assessment methods of these courses are diverse and combine practical exercises with independent research, assessed with a longer essay.

Students of Egyptology have the possibility to benefit from the cross-fertilization of Egyptology with archaeology, ancient history and osteology, on the Visby campus, within the department. Students had a good understanding of what was expected of them, on the level of the degree structure, examination procedures and evaluation criteria.

The most serious weakness is the current lack of an MA programme in Egyptology. It is reasonable to assume that this acts as a deterrent for student recruitment in that those embarking on a BA degree know full well that it is not possible to continue their studies at an advanced level at the same institution. It is clear that plans for a future MA programme are well advanced, however, and that its implementation is imminent; the problem is on other words already being addressed.

One area where there might be room for improvement is in making it clear that much of the teaching in Egyptology is research based. The reality of this is evident to us, but not necessarily to the students – experience suggests that even undergraduate students appreciate when the link between knowledge and research practices is made explicit.

For small subjects it is important that students do not feel isolated academically, and we would encourage teachers to consider ways in which Egyptology might be integrated more closely with neighbouring disciplines, perhaps primarily through seminars, workshops, or other extra-curricular activities.

### *Challenges*

Like any other degree in the humanities, the BA in Egyptology at Uppsala faces challenges on different levels, from the structural to the individual classroom situation. The considerable investment in the subject by the institution is welcome, and does much to ensure a stable academic environment for both students and teachers, but with this investment comes responsibility and accountability. Management and teachers may wish to consider what their respective expectations are, in the long term, for example in terms of student

numbers and drop-out rates. In short, what is needed for Egyptology to be sustainable, and what can be done to maximise recruitment and retainment?

In this context we think it might be useful to think about strategies like recruitment from the introductory year, where a stronger presence of Egyptological topics, materials, and teachers should have a positive effect. As with the MA plans mentioned above, it is clear that the department is aware of this challenge and is actively working to address it.

With a projected increased intake of students comes an increased need for active investment also in the quality of the study environment, and here there would appear to be significant possibilities to develop a stronger sense of community – a vital factor for student retention. Specific proposals would be to facilitate social occasions and events locally, for example in the form of introductory sessions for new students to meet and socialise with teachers at the beginning of term, a reception or meeting at the end of term, or similar. Formalised but voluntary excursions to visit Egyptian collections and research institutions elsewhere (e.g. London, Berlin, or Paris) could be another way to build up a vibrant sense of community, and provide students with network possibilities, both among their peers and international colleagues.

On a classroom level there is perhaps a challenge in establishing how to best deliver teaching when the students have different educational backgrounds at the tertiary level. Students reported differing experiences according to whether they had had the full year of various foundational courses (the introductory year), or not, and this will presumably be even more pronounced if the overall intake of students increases.

#### *Development perspectives*

We see perspectives for improvement in two main areas: that of the degree structure and in information policy.

The introductory courses in the first year of the BA Archaeology and Ancient History offer a good foundation for the in-depth study of Egyptology in years 2 and 3. However, they would benefit from a stronger co-ordination to ensure that all teachers involved understand the structure of the course and the context, in which they offer a lecture. The course Essay Writing introduces essential skills at a rather late point within the degree. We recommend that students be familiarized with academic writing and presentation skills from early on in order to have sufficient opportunities during their studies for exercising these skills prior to writing the Bachelor thesis. Students expressed an interest in having more hours of teaching. It was apparent to the panel that they enjoy their classes. While it might not be possible, due to time constraints, to increase the number of lectures, teachers might consider offering informal opportunities for more contact hours with students, which might include individual supervision during office hours or student trips to collections, as mentioned above.

Information on the different ways in which Egyptology can be studied could be presented more clearly on the website. For instance, a graphical representation of the different ways one can build modules in Egyptology into different degree structures (with or without the introductory course in year 1), and the possibilities for selecting individual modules in Egyptology to combine them with other modules, including courses in archaeological science or physical anthropology. We recommend that existing Erasmus agreements of Egyptology at Uppsala be advertised more widely in order to raise awareness among students of the opportunity for studying abroad and to strengthen international ties of Egyptology at Uppsala. While the current degree offers a wide range of transferable skills, students might benefit from being trained more efficiently in identifying and developing these. We recommend reflecting on offering more opportunities for internships and training in practical skills, including on the job market outside academia. The department might also consider making information on student support more explicit.

### *Course improvements*

We have few concrete proposals for course improvements – from the documentation supplied, the student feedback, and the information gathered through the interviews, it is clear that most courses are working well and that students are acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge. One issue that was raised by students was a desire for more essay-based assessment, perhaps partly reflecting a desire for more training and preparation for the BA thesis at the end of the course – to what extent this is possible or desirable from a structural and pedagogical perspective is a matter for the subject group to decide.

It was the impression of the panel that some parts of the courses in the introductory year might benefit from a stronger methodological focus. For example, while it was clear that introduction to landscape archaeology dealt not simply with knowledge of different types of landscapes but also with issues like the influence on lived (human) experience, it was less clear if the course on script, language and text dealt mainly with types of writing and genres of texts, or if it also introduced the methodological challenges of working with ancient written sources. If this impression is correct then this is one area where a better coordination of the introductory year (see above) might contribute to a more coherent experience for students – who are exposed to a considerable range of topics in this first year – and at the same time allow them to hone their skills in critical thinking.

It was not clear to the panel if students were tested in unseen translations at any point in their studies, and it may be worth keeping this in mind when discussing syllabi in the future. While this is often the most demanding part of any examination, it also provides talented students with the opportunity to demonstrate the application of abstract knowledge in practice, and for examiners to distinguish between a very good and an exceptional performance.

### *Ensuring quality*

The issue of quality assurance is central to both the integrity of the learning environment and the student experience of the learning process. It is clear that the procedures already in place, notably in the form of student feedback surveys, are robust, but the value of such feedback, as in any other survey, is inextricably linked to the representativeness of responses. The number of students who took part in the surveys was invariably very low, and we would encourage both teachers and the department as a whole to consider ways of improving participation: one possibility might be to make it a compulsory activity during one of the last lectures of a course, where students fill in online forms, e.g. on their computers or mobile phones, before they leave the classroom. Naturally those not present would have to be given the opportunity to submit online at another time, but it might improve the statistical basis for evaluating teaching practices.

All teachers have taken or are about to take various university courses in pedagogy, suggesting that teaching is organised along established pedagogical principles, and that the university is fulfilling its commitment to quality assurance of teaching at the department.

Current marking practices are broadly in line with international standards, and the following observations should be seen only as suggestions for reflection. In cases where two members of staff share the marking of assessed work from a single course (e.g. for linguistic reasons where one might handle English and the other Swedish essays) it might be useful to consider procedures for ensuring consistency in marking. Finally, and with the caveat that the panel is aware of the restrictions of the formal framework for marking practices, it is not obvious that the extremely broad grades available, where there are only two options for passing (good or very good), can really do justice to exceptional performances by talented students. This is a structural issue that may have to be addressed at a higher level than the subject group, but we would encourage teachers to consider the implications of this system and to raise the issue in the appropriate circumstances should the opportunity arise.

### *Conclusion*

Finally, the panel would like to stress that although it is in the nature of a report like this to focus on areas where there is room for improvement, this should not detract from the overall impression of the BA programme in Egyptology at Uppsala. It provides a broad and varied education that is taught by internationally recognised scholars, and its current success is remarkable in view of the limited personnel that has been available in recent years: it is one of the few places in the world where student numbers in Egyptology are actually going up. In view of the current development of a graduate student community there is every reason to believe that Egyptology at Uppsala will continue to thrive.

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