

Assessment of master's program in Global Environmental History (advanced level)

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Sabine Höhler, Thomas Lavelle, Annika Nilsson, Saskia Rubensson

This report communicates the primary conclusion of the assessment panel tasked by the Uppsala University Faculty of Arts to evaluate the master's program in Global Environmental History of the Department of Archeology and Ancient History. The assessment process included study of the faculty's self-assessment and program documentation and a site visit in Uppsala on September 11 and 12, 2019. During this site visit, our assessment group met with the program management team: the Program Coordinator, Director of Studies and Department Head. Second, we met three faculty members teaching in the program, one of whom is the program coordinator. These teachers represented two organizations (A&AH and SLU). Importantly, we did not meet instructors from Art History or Economic History. Last but not least, we met with a group of eight students from seven different countries. In what follows, we describe strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities, together with some recommendations that follow from that analysis.

Strengths

The program builds on exciting and highly relevant subject matter. Globalization, sustainability, and question of social justice are integrated into the program themes. This attracts strong student and builds in turn on the engagement of the program coordinator and her core faculty (at least those whom we met). The subject is also multidisciplinary, and the obligatory coursework reflects current, in fact state-of-the-art, scholarship on environmental issues; thereby it meets the requirements of advanced education, i.e. it meets the goals defined by HSL & HSF as well as the program's specific goals. Obligatory course content reflects in many respects the program's global, i.e. international, point of departure. Although the program no longer has a strong foothold in the more traditional fields of history and historiography, the organizers succeeded in creating a surprisingly rich and perhaps unique version of global environmental history at the intersection of historical ecology, environmental, postcolonial and cultural studies, all with a global historical perspective. Building on these obvious strengths, the program has a comparatively strong completion rate and the majority of students finish on time or nearly on time. This, of course, reflects success in the achievement of key program-level goals.

The students are not only highly engaged, but also diverse along a number of parameters. They come with diverse disciplinary backgrounds and represent a wide range of nationalities, which combine to create diverse perspectives on global environmental questions. Particularly noteworthy is the inclusion of students from the natural sciences and engineering, whom one might not typically expect to meet in a humanities master's program. These students exercise a significant amount of influence on their education,

particularly over the composition of their curricula and their learning processes. Primarily, this takes the form of selecting coursework to negotiate the gap between term one's obligatory courses and the research and writing of their theses, which represents the program's other tool for learning and assessment at the advanced level. The students also appear to operate in a constructive and secure academic environment. For example, the program has created a voluntary yet effective peer-learning system (mentorship), which nurtures positive attitudes within and across cohorts, not least in creating learning opportunities for all students. The students we met also expressed much appreciation of the mentorship system. A student with special needs also spoke explicitly about the benefits of this system, as well as the university helping to meet those need with the appropriate tools and infrastructure.

Within the program, these students meet a strong pedagogical vision. This vision is characterized by a strong belief that students mature intellectually by developing elements of their curricula in order to bridge the space between the early obligatory courses and thesis completion. This belief rests, in turn, upon intellectual trust that students are capable of making suitable choices and connections. This approach, coupled with academic guidance, is a prerequisite for autonomous learning, another desirable learning outcome. Finally, this pedagogical vision includes work with expectation management, where the key point is that high expectations lead to high performance. This pedagogy seems enable individual students to prepare for their professional lives, and the programs work with career development aims is addressed below.

In total, this program, its vision, and its core faculty combine to create a strong sense of program identity among students. One feature of this identity seems to be a pioneering spirit, a willingness to cross disciplinary (and by extension epistemological) borders.

Weaknesses

The clearest weakness evident in the program is a series of organizational obstacles that follow from the program's trans-departmental structure. That structure follows in part from the program's interdisciplinary nature, but also in part from a number of organizational and curricular decisions. Together, they lead to several practical consequences. The first is that the program, offered formally by the Department of Archeology and Ancient History, cannot control the syllabi of all its courses, even all the obligatory courses. This raises questions about guaranteeing course quality and progression and about ensuring that program aims and intended outcomes are achieved. This problem grows exponentially when extended into the plethora of optional courses students choose. Moreover, it extends to not being able to control, or even influence, scheduling. As a result, some students reported delaying their program in order to take courses they wanted when their schedules clashed. Finally, because of these obstacles, practical considerations, such as what courses simply work together logistically, can undermine one of the program's strengths and pedagogical cornerstones, students individually developing their own curricula.

Another weakness linked to organization is the necessity to resort to unconventional but pragmatic administrative solutions, which may not be completely appropriate formally. The A&AH “mirror course” in theory and methods is the clearest example. It has been introduced as a shadow course to the SLU course that the students attend, to work around SLU’s admission requirements, which otherwise would exclude some GEH students. As a result, students are formally registered, studying and examined at A&AH, while they actually attend a course and take exams at another university. It is difficult to overestimate the impact of this arrangement on quality assurance efforts and the accuracy of student transcripts.

Yet another consequence of organizational obstacles is that students lack formal representation and thus formal organizational influence. While the Department of A&AH has student representatives for its other courses and programs, this representation does not extend to GEH students, as students pointed out in their interviews. Finally, by working across institutional boundaries, the program does not appear to be in a position to ensure that it has the teaching capacity to deliver obligatory courses. If such an assessment can be made at all, that can be done only in the consortium of collaborators, which does not at present have any formal structure.

As pointed out, these organizational obstacles follow in part from the program’s interdisciplinarity, which while often an academic strength can also manifest as an academic weakness. One such weakness is a reliance upon external supervisors. While a student’s freedom to define and develop a thesis topic is central to the program’s pedagogy, neither the host department nor the other collaborating departments can provide the full range of expertise required to supervise the extensive range of topics GEH students develop. This in turn leads to a dependence upon external supervisors, and in the absence of formal selection and review processes, there remains a question about the quality assurance of these supervisors however much we share a commitment to collegiality and trust in the academic community. Granted also that the program coordinator steps in in these cases to provide joint or informal supervision, a model that seems to be working, it is a function of reviews of this kind to identify systemic or structural improvements to successful ad hoc solutions. Another way of making the same point is to underscore the need to replace a person-dependent model of success with an explicit organizational model.

Another organizational weakness concerns a mismatch between course documentation and reported course realities. The program course overview and course syllabi documents do not provide any insight into the richness and relevance of the program. One needs to go deep into each individual course’s information to get an understanding of how the program actually engages with the ecological humanities across the disciplinary divides. Course syllabi for obligatory courses describe their content as introductions and overviews. This description is at odds with both the formal requirements of advanced-level studies and our interviews with faculty and students. Similarly, the format and aims of one obligatory course, Current Themes and Debates in GEH, is underdefined in the syllabus although the panel received in its interviews an articulate explanation of what the course does and of its function within the program. Finally, the program-level learning objectives are clearly

generic in nature, and the expression “Global Environmental History” could be replaced by any subject. This deprives students, and other stakeholders, of the guidance strong program aims are meant to provide.

At the curricular and pedagogical levels, we see another phenomenon that functions as a strength but also as a weakness. That is the curricular gap between term one and the completed thesis. Optional courses fill this gap, and while this approach is essential to the program’s trust-based, student-centered pedagogy, it also moves to the students the responsibility for synthesizing program learning and ensuring the progression into advanced learning. When this works, as it often does, this is excellent. When it doesn’t, students fail or their progress is delayed. Additionally, this allocates the task of quality assurance of instruction during this period either to the students themselves, which is inappropriate, or to other departments of the university, which presumably quality assure their courses with other aims and ends in mind. To this end, students have asked for additional guidance in this respect (even though the Current Themes course and a range of other activities are working in this direction).

A final weakness, perhaps an overarching one, concerns the program’s strategic aims. None of the documentation or interviews expressed a program strategy. Also in a strategic vein, the self-evaluation identifies preparation for doctoral studies as one program goal. However, only one of the students interviewed shared this goal. In any case, a single professional orientation of this kind does not satisfy expectations for students’ professional development and preparation for working life. Nor does it provide the guidance an explicit strategy would provide for regular, continuous development and improvement of the program. Naturally, strategic work of this kind requires time, and while we do not have data on funding and budgets, indirect indicators point to an extreme shortage of resources for this kind of work. The panel, nevertheless, sees strategic objectives as essential for the successful development and delivery of an educational program over time.

Threats

The structural weaknesses that follow from the its organizational complexity place the program as a whole in a vulnerable position. Most obvious in this regard is the program’s dependence the good will of contributing departments and core teachers – especially the program coordinator. So far, it seems as though the program has worked around the structural challenges through innovation, informal collaboration, and the efforts of key individuals. While this flexibility and intellectual creativity has proven successful, a danger remains of relying too heavily on the engagement of individuals, particularly on the program coordinator. Such person-dependence obviously increases the program’s vulnerability.

Opportunities and Recommendations

- 1) Establish a GEH program council or working group in order to bridge the organizational and administrative challenges described. The host department should formalize and lead this group, with representation from the core departments and

teaching staff. Administration and students can also be involved when appropriate. The program came into being through the collaboration of a working group, and we learned that some of these challenges were evident even then. Formalizing and empowering such collaboration again is one way to address the threats and weaknesses identified above and thus to ensure quality, progression, formally appropriate administration, and strategic development work. Formal student representation could also be ensured through their involvement in such a collaborative working group.

- 2) Funding and resources: We have not seen a program budget or budget figures. That these figures are not available might be a symptom of the structural weakness of working across departments. Proper budgeting would help identify financial shortfalls and support arguments for a revision of program funding to stabilize program administration and coordination and also speak to the students' wishes for more study advice.
- 3) Review the international admissions process to curb the high number of early-on dropouts that are partly responsible for the small cohorts. Other programs actively survey both dropouts and student who genuinely enter the programs about their reasons.
- 4) Establish a more formalized student representation, e.g. in the form of a student council.
- 5) The career opportunities this program creates and supports appear to be manifold, ranging from NGO work to policy advice to PR to education and business, but they remain implicit. We recommend working more systematically and substantively with career development beyond preparation for PhD studies. To facilitate this, we recommend an active and continuous follow-up of program alumni.
- 6) Sustainability and gender/ethnic diversity is in many ways already topical in global environmental history. Yet, equality, diversity and equal opportunities could be developed and more consciously and explicitly integrated into the program's work with student cohorts. This may well further strengthen student motivation and group cohesion while substantiating a program theme.
- 7) Work towards securing better and more collaborations within and beyond the department (like that mentioned in 1) above.
- 8) Do more systematic strategy work, and on that basis carry out a local, yet visible continuous, annual program review.