

Meeting OLC – Program Board on Academic Profile of the Program (28. January 2020)

Present: Hannah De Mulder, Irene Hadiprayitno, Kim Deschka, Mario Esperon Oubina, Marat Markert, Joost Augusteijn (PB), Giles Scott-Smith (PB)

Background

In November 2019 the program board (PB) presented to the OLC a document that outlines how specific elements of the academic profile of the BA International Studies program can be adjusted/further clarified. The document was drawn up by a working group tasked with mapping out how students are taught and exposed to multidisciplinary and to global perspectives on the region of their specialization. At the center of this document are proposals for changes to, and further specifications of the BAIS achievement levels (i.e. what students of BAIS can be expected to do in terms research in their BA thesis and how the program assesses those skills). After a negative advice of the OLC on this document, the PB sought to clarify the rationale behind the proposed changes and address the points raised by the OLC in a face-to-face meeting in January 2020.

Comments/recommendations

The following comments/advice are based on the discussion with the PB on the adjusted academic profile (and the explicit request by the PB (Joost) to give feedback on points b-c):

- a) on the plans to recalibrate the knock-out criteria for the BA thesis, whereby a BA thesis should henceforth be multidisciplinary and contain a global perspective;
- b) on the clarity of the definitions for the terms multidisciplinary and global perspective;
- c) on the proposal to give the thematic seminar in Year 2/Semester 2 a methodological focus;
- d) on adding/identifying themes in the program (for the purpose of mapping out pathways for students to specialize in, as well as for structuring thesis seminars).

Below we elaborate each point in detail:

a) Knock-out criteria for Thesis: Multidisciplinary and Global Perspective

The proposal for an adjusted academic profile includes a suggestion to have the current knock-out criteria for the BA thesis expanded, so that henceforth BA theses in International Studies have to include both a multidisciplinary perspective and a global perspective. Up until now, the knock-out criteria stipulate that BA theses have to contain a multidisciplinary perspective or provide a global perspective. The PB explained that the rationale behind this change is to give International Studies a more distinctive profile, highlighting how the BA International Studies program is different from other programs in the area studies cluster (e.g. Japan Studies). In addition to that, the PB argues that since multidisciplinary is seen as one of the main pillars of the program, and students are exposed to various methods in the different core, area and elective courses throughout their studies, students should be able to demonstrate their broader exposure to various disciplinary perspective in their thesis. In other words, the BA thesis is an opportunity for students to showcase their research skills, and at the same time proof of their ability to follow more specialized (mono-disciplinary) master programs.

The OLC thinks that these are fairly demanding criteria for a BA thesis in International Studies and is not entirely convinced by the rationale for this change. Specifically, if the issue is one of differentiation, the “global perspective” criteria should be sufficient to distinguish International Studies theses from other regional-focus programs (Area studies programs focus on a given area, whereas BAIS students could make comparisons across areas). The questions for us at this point are: Do other area study programs at LU produce mono-disciplinary theses? If not, would it be sufficient to leave the choice to students to either produce a multidisciplinary thesis or have a global perspective?

Regarding the argument that more demanding criteria for the thesis could help students to access a given master's program: Ultimately, it should be the responsibility of the student to draw out their study pathway autonomously and decide what skills they want to showcase in their thesis. If students plan to continue their study in, say political science or political economy, nothing prevents them under the current system to write a thesis in which they demonstrate that they have the skills to use methods/theories from political science or economics/political economy.

In addition to that, there is also the concern whether all supervisors are actually able to provide the necessary supervision/expertise and ultimately correct and evaluate multidisciplinary thesis. To evaluate whether methodologies from two disciplines are used correctly, TS supervisors should be of course versed in those different methodologies. In theory, TS supervisors could ask colleagues in case they are not sure whether the approaches or methods used in a given BA thesis are sound/correct. In practice this would mean additional workload for those colleagues, and given the current discussion about workload at the faculty, this is not a feasible/reliable mechanism that could easily be enforced. At any rate, whatever knock-out criteria we choose, we want to avoid a tick-the-box approach on the side of both student and TS supervisor. Therefore, before changing the current knock-out criteria for the thesis (regardless of the laudable goals we seek to achieve with this), we would like to urge the PB to consider whether this is really necessary, given the constraints we might face on the side of academic staff and expertise.

b) Definitions

With regard to the definition of multidisciplinary, it is of course handy to provide a definition for Thesis Seminar supervisors – so we welcome the efforts being made here by the working group. The OLC has some suggestions on the definition of multidisciplinary. B1 seems to suggest that using, for example, a theory from another discipline should be enough, while B2 refers mainly to methodologies. Perhaps it would be handy to include an illustrative example in the manual to show some of the possible ways to go about this.

With regard to the definition of global perspective: the part on the comparative (inter-regional) perspective is clear (A2), while the part on “broader global developments” should be specified further in the manual (ideally with an illustrative example). What type of theories do we have in mind?

c) Thematic Seminar (Year 2/Sem 2): more methodological focus?

Part of the working groups tasks on the academic profile was also to highlight where in the program we teach what kind of methods. In this context, the PB asked the OLC whether it would be a good idea to also give the thematic seminar in year 2/sem 2 (what was previously called elective) a methodological focus. On this point the OLC is rather skeptical: while it doesn't “hurt” to state which method is used in the course description, it shouldn't lead to a prescription/obligation for seminar leaders to address specific methodological literature, or make methodology a specific topic in those seminars. One of the course requirements for thematic seminars is to produce an academic paper of 5000 words – and one would think that part of this written assignment is to ponder about methodology...

d) The role of themes in the program

The working group also sought to identify themes that run throughout the different courses in the program. Though at this point it is not clear what role these themes could play in the program, if at all, the PB inquired with the OLC whether it would be a useful addition to the program structure to have the themes guiding what kind of courses are offered in the program. In its initial response the OLC has been very critical of adding an additional layer of complexity over courses, in particular Thesis Seminars (next to region and discipline, an additional layer of theme would be added). In light of the issues discussed under a), adding a thematic layer might make it more difficult to find supervisors that fit under a given theme. In addition, it would restrict the academic freedom of our academic staff further (imposing themes would certainly be received as yet another instrument to micromanage – even if it is

not intended this way). One could argue that the proposed themes are fairly broad and many topics could fit under it. But then the question becomes: what is the purpose of adding themes if they are so broad?

Themes might also be those that are contemporarily en vogue, while topics that might not fit under a theme might be left out.