Report - AG2805 - 2020-11-09

Respondents: 1
Answer Count: 1
Answer Frequency: 100.00%

Please note that there is only one respondent to this form: the person that performs the course analysis.

Course analysis carried out by (name, e-mail):
Pernilla Hagbert, pernilla.hagbert@abe.kth.se

DESCRIPTION OF THE COURSE EVALUATION PROCESS
Describe the course evaluation process. Describe how all students have been given the possibility to give their opinions on the course. Describe how aspects regarding gender, and disabled students are investigated.

Approximately at the midpoint of the course, an open, digital mid course meeting was held, where a handful of students attended.

On the final course day, a digital course discussion was held, where approx. half of the students attended. A course evaluation was then distributed to all students after the finalization of the course. Of 89 students, 41 answered the evaluation, equivalent to a response rate of 46%.

A final course meeting was held 3,5 weeks after the course finished, which was attended by student representatives, teachers, course responsible teachers, and representatives from the program. It was commented at the course meeting that the ample occasions for students to provide feedback was appreciated, but that having both a course discussion and then a course evaluation might be overwhelming for some students who feel like they have already conveyed their feedback. It might be relevant to consider the format of course discussion and evaluation, allowing for a freer format or finding other ways to encourage feedback.

Aspects concerning gender and disability are addressed in the course evaluation - commented below.

DESCRIPTION OF MEETINGS WITH STUDENTS
Describe which meetings that has been arranged with students during the course and after its completion. (The outcomes of these meetings should be reported under 7, below.)

Approximately at the midpoint of the course, an open, digital mid course meeting was held, where a handful of students attended.

On the final course day, a final digital course discussion was held, including a lecture by Johan Högström and short reflection exercise where the students were asked to reflect upon their learning and work process in the Part 3 group project. Approx. half of the students attended.

After the completion of the course, a final course meeting was held, which was attended by student representatives, teachers, course responsible teachers, and representatives from the program.

COURSE DESIGN
Briefly describe the course design (learning activities, examinations) and any changes that have been implemented since the last course offering.

The course includes both formative and summative assessment. The course is structured into four parts:
• Part 1 is a small project work exploring urban planning history and contemporary challenges in Stockholm. The task is to, in groups, investigate how the new comprehensive plan for Stockholm relates to the existing urban landscape, and explore whether deploying its strategy can also lead to improve conditions of sustainability. This part is examined through a group project presentation, and is graded P/F.
• Part 2 comprises a number of exercises on qualitative and quantitative methods for assessing and understanding sustainable urban development. This part is examined through an individual assignment (methods essay) and participation in peer-review seminar. It is graded P /F.
• Part 3 is a group project work where students develop either a planning and policy or a design proposal for a sustainable municipality in the year 2050. A municipality in the greater Stockholm area is chosen each year, where students interact with the municipality's particular challenges. Part 3 is examined through hand in of digital project presentation, posters and/or project report (depending on type of project), and presentation at a final critique (and written peer-review of another project is students are doing a planning project). Graded A-F
• Part 4 comprises a reflective home exam. This allows students to synthesize and reflect on the learning from the course, with a focus on describing and critically reflecting on the relationship between sustainable urban development, and sustainable development in general, and describing and critically reflecting on how planning and design can contribute to sustainable urban development. It is graded A-F.

The main change this year, other than adjustments made for Covid-19, was the introduction of lecture packages, where all lectures in the course were grouped thematically into 5 sessions. A semi-flipped classroom approach was used, with assigned readings beforehand and having students prepare questions. After the lectures, students were grouped into smaller discussion groups, to find questions brought up from the literature and lectures. Finally, the lecture sessions were concluded by student-led panel debates with the lecturers, where a student moderator collected questions from fellow students and was encouraged to interact with the panel.

The course emphasises project based learning, and group projects. The challenge of students with diverse backgrounds working together is a recurring issue brought up every year. This year, expectations for group projects were even more clearly communicated, yet this remains an issue needing further attention (see below).

THE STUDENTS' WORKLOAD
Does the students' workload correspond to the expected level (40 hours/1.5 credits)? If these is a significant deviation from the expected, what can be the reason?

Workload:

Regarding workload, there is a notable difference from 2019 (when many more students expressed a high workload). This year, this is more dispersed, with some stating they spent more than 41 hours per week, and others spending everything from 6-40 hours per week on the course. While some find the course intensive and demanding, this was also perceived appropriate, and being well organized, "so it's okay". Or as expressed by another student, it was good that so much was scheduled, so that students could be free during other times. This can be contrasted by some, particularly students with a design background, who said they felt a high workload and pressure to deliver, and said they had to work in evenings as well. One respondent states having worked more than 90 h one week, due to other team members not carrying their load, and having to carry the project alone. Another respondent also points to having to take a large workload as they perceived their group members to be unwilling to contribute. This is serious and should be avoided and hopefully picked up upon in supervision or, as suggested by one student in the course evaluation - by having an anonymous feedback forum to address issues with group work.

Regarding the assigned readings, some students felt they had adequate time to adequately go through the literature before lectures, while others found it too stressful – having to read during weekends. This was also aired during the course discussion, with some suggesting more time, while others found it adequate. One solution might be to more clearly schedule in time for reading, and communicate regarding what is expected.

THE STUDENTS' RESULTS
How well have the students succeeded on the course? If there are significant differences compared to previous course offerings, what can be the reason?

Considering the special situation with Covid-19, the students performed well. The quality of project work was good, despite many groups not being able to work together in the same way as a regular year.

The home exam shows great variation among students, some who are not used to academic writing, and others who were understimulated (not being able to show their academic reading and writing skills beyond the limited scope of the home exam questions).

STUDENTS´ANSWERS TO OPEN QUESTIONS
What does students say in response to the open questions?

The students on average found the course interesting, challenging and stimulating. Particularly the combination of theory and practice is upheld by many respondents.

However, some respondents suggest that Part 1 and 3 are similar, and could be combined. Others are more critical of the assumed background knowledge (see below) and request some introductory examples to learn more regarding the design process. Also issues of coordination and communication are brought up by some students.

SUMMARY OF STUDENTS' OPINIONS
Summarize the outcome of the questionnaire, as well as opinions emerging at meetings with students.

Overall, the average response to LEQ statements (ca. 5,9) was overwhelmingly positive, with no score below 5,4 (meaning slightly more in agreement than neutral). This is an improvement from 2019, where the average responses were about 1 point below across most statements.

This year, the lectures were packaged into themed sessions, with group discussions and a panel between the lecturers concluding each lecture package. In the evaluation and course discussion, this was seen as something mostly positive, with different perspectives and particularly having insights from practitioners from the field.

Furthermore, students perceived the teachers to be mostly responsive, although some point to the need for quicker responses to specific questions, to receive schedules on time and clearer task descriptions. Overall coordination and timely communication of relevant information is something that some respondents feel could be improved, and this is an ongoing development area in the course, trying to bring together different teachers. Improvements here regarding e.g. scheduling supervision could be streamlined.

Regarding Part 2 - Methods, we especially noted the following comments:
· Good selection, and sufficiently wide range, of methods
· Stressful with a lot to read before some of the method days (especially for the LCA / EIA method, we think they mean)
· The exercises were a bit too simplistic in relation to what literature and lecturers said about how to apply/perform the methods.
· Part 2 – Methods was too compressed, into only one week, and not explicitly linked to the other parts of the course
Some express (in course evaluation and course discussion) wanting more of methods in the course as a whole, and working more integrated with them. This was also addressed at the final course meeting, suggesting to have a combination of more research based methods (as currently), and more practical tools/methods from both design and planning. This would benefit all students and develop a sense of understanding of the process, whether working more towards design or planning in later projects.

Regarding the opportunity to receive feedback without being graded, some students responded that they lacked feedback or that the feedback they received was not helpful enough to lead in the correct direction, most likely referring to the group projects in Part 3. On the other hand, other students found the supervision in Part 3 helpful, and that the feedback given was constructive. Regarding support, it is noted by one respondent that perhaps having an anonymous feedback session to flag if group work is not working would be helpful. This was also further discussed at the final course meeting, emphasising the importance of introducing ways of working in a project group work, and the need to e.g. delegate tasks, while still being able to work together in a cohesive way.

OVERALL IMPRESSION
Summarize the teachers' overall impressions of the course offering in relation to students' results and their evaluation of the course, as well as in relation to the changes implemented since last course offering.

The students were, despite the current pandemic, positive and hard-working, providing a good peer-learning environment. Main criticisms from previous years are not as clearly stated this year, although important improvements can be made regarding coordination, communication, integration of different course elements, and not the least the issue regarding interdisciplinarity. This needs further attention, and suggestions for improvement regarding e.g. the introduction of project work, approaches and tools, as well as creating an opportunity for students to present their own background experience, skills and perspectives, and to encourage learning from each other.

In summary, the course can only benefit further by further development, which is planned for next year's course offering. Emphasis should be placed on providing more opportunities for interaction between students, underlining the interdisciplinary character of the course and program, clarifying pedagogical strategies and improving course coordination between the different teachers involved.

ANALYSIS
Is it possible to identify stronger and weaker areas in the learning environment based on the information you have gathered during the evaluation and analysis process? What can the reason for these be? Are there significant difference in experience between:
- students identifying as female and male?
- international and national students?
- students with or without disabilities?

Student diversity and educational background:

A recurring question in the course is the diverse background of students, particularly considering educational background and bachelor degree, but also nationality. Also this year, this was noted in the course discussion and in the course evalutation. Particularly the difference in approaches to academic literature and writing, the varying expertise or familiarity with computer programs and design skills, and varying familiarity with different subject thematics, were noted.

Some of the free text comments from the course evaluation emphasise the importance of mixing students, and find this was done in a good way. One respondent however reflects upon that e.g. Swedish students tend to a larger extent choose the planning projekt in Part 3, which is indicative of the disciplinary backgrounds as well (with more Swedish students coming from KTHs planning program). This is an issue when working with the Swedish urban context and documents, where it is necessary to have a native Swedish-speaker, and preferably one familiar with the planning context, for all group members to understand.

Another issue brought up is that the expectations for academic writing is different, so students used to something different had to adjust. This underlines the need to clearly communicate what is expected to avoid confusion. Finally, a free text comment made regarding language proficiency was that for those whose first language is not English, some lectures were a bit more difficult to understand, as they contained professional texts or concepts. This was also brought up in the course discussion, where a similar discussion as 2019, of the possibility of having different levels of literature was discussed by the teacher – allowing for an introduction to key concepts and themes, and then providing opportunities for diving deeper into subjects that are new to different students. A comment during the final course meeting was made regarding the need for receiving earlier feedback on academic writing skills, if this is seen as important in the course, in order for students to not be assessed on this and graded until the very end of the course, in the home exam. This is a relevant point and should be addressed in the course development, to allow for more continuous learning activities and feedback regarding academic reading and writing - taking into consideration the different previous experiences students have of this.

Overall, respondents in the course evaluation perceive that their background knowledge was sufficient to follow the course. However, as highlighted in the course discussion, working together in the group projects also demands being more explicit about the diverse knowledges and skills, and it could help to articulate this further. Providing students an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and not only relying on others in the groups project is important, particularly in Design projects where students with design/architecture background might carry a larger load with drawings etc, but where other students might have more proficiency in other types of analysis. A greater exchange between students should be encouraged in different ways, not to reproduce a rhetoric of design/non-design students. A suggestion at the final course meeting was also to clarify requirements also for planning projects, and be clearer regarding possible ways of working that delegates sub-tasks, but still ensures a collaborative work.

Gender considerations:

The respondents identifying as female displayed slightly more agreement with the questions overall. The free text comments reveal that among the respondents, there was a perception of good gender balance in e.g. group work, no discrimination or mistreatment based on gender, and no particular experience of gender having notably influenced their perspectives on the course.

Disability:

We had several students in the course with various disabilities. Trying to accommodate this in different ways, we worked with e.g. external support for simultaneous texting, extended hand-in times and generally trying to communicate as clearly as possible, using Canvas for important messages. No other comments regarding this was made in the course evaluation, except one student who notes that they had a hard time focusing and finding time to read all the literature before the lectures.

PRIORITIZED COURSE DEVELOPMENT
What aspects of the course should be developed primaily? How can these aspects be developed in short and long term?

The themes and key concepts in the lecture packages could be made even clearer (echoed also by one respondent in the course evaluation). To avoid repetition in course literature and lecture content, this could also be more clearly stated as the pedagogical point is to prepare students before the lectures, to be able to discuss and ask relevant questions. The question of the adequacy of the literature was perceived in different ways, but could be revised even further. Generally, the format for the lecture package sessions seem to have worked well and can be further developed to encourage student-led learning, e.g. proposing thematic topics or discussions based in the students' previous areas of knowledge and interest, together with the multiple teachers involved in the course. This should be discussed further in the development of the course.

The outline of project work, and the dynamics of group work, could be more clearly introduced, inviting students to reflect upon different knowledges and skills. A suggestion that came up during the final course meeting was to make this part of the first part of the course, e.g. through 1 day workshops or different exercises that allows students to familiarize themselves with design and planning approaches and ways of working with projects. Also making sure the projects challenge students in different ways is important to develop further. This is a larger question for the program as a whole, how to work interdisciplinary. To have some students pulling all the weight in project work is not acceptable, and finding ways to e.g. discuss group dynamics anonymously might be relevant to explore. In general, using this course as an opportunity to really reflect upon group project work and various roles, responsibilities and opportunities for collaboration should be emphasized.

Regarding Part 2 - Methods, we prioritize to re-schedule it into two different working weeks, with two or three methods taught in each. We will also consider making one of these weeks match, in time, with when they might need methods' skills to work in a group project (Part 3, or maybe Part 1). We will balance the readings so that the LCA / EIA method will have fewer readings, more in line with the amount of the other methods. In relation to this, we will also consider to split the LCA and EIA methods into two different days. Finally, after rescheduling/expanding the time span of the course part, we will ask the involved teachers to elaborate the exercises so that that they reflect a more complete application of the methods.

Course coordination and communication needs to be improved further. The use of Canvas has improved greatly and can continue to provide students with clear instructions and schedule, as well as interaction with teachers and peers.

Finally, some comments regarding feedback from teachers as being harsh calls attention to the need for greater communication between teachers, and to students, outlining the pedagogical approach of the course and the role and form of feedback (which might be new to some).