SUMMARY FROM MEETING REGARDING EVALUATION OF THE MASTERS PROGRAM

This is a summary from a meeting held on the 17th of November 2020, aimed to evaluate the structure, content and workings of the master program. The meeting was held on request of the Institute Council, following a case presented by students where there was expressed that the program needs changes.

Both students and tutors were present. The students present at the meeting were the student representatives from each year. They had gathered view and opinions from their peers.

Attendees:
Svein-Petter Knudsen, Dora Isleifsdottir, Eli-Stin Eide, Torkell Bernsen, Gustav Kvaal, Petter Bergerud, Anna Schmideder, Natalie P. Kulsrud, Theodore Folstad, Thanee R. A. Mejia, Lena Bienert, Gustav Kvaal, Taran Neckelmann (referent).

The report will discuss the main points made during the meeting, and an effort to conclude is made at the end. It focuses on the structure and content of the Master Program.

In addition, the student representatives wanted to add a list of concrete issues in order to bring this discussion down to a practical level. It is attached at the end.

MAIN POINTS

1. There was a clear opinion from the students that there was far too many obligatory courses and not enough time to focus and deep-dive into their own projects. It was expressed that student dont feel like they can design their own process, but are led through a standardised process made after a "one size fits all" mindset. There also needs to be a clearer structure on the program as a whole, including how much time is set aside for courses and how much time is allocated to independent study.

2. Both tutors and students expressed that the program was weighted too heavily on theory and thinking, as opposed to doing and experiencing. Both groups also expressed a need to be included in making the course-plan.

3. Some courses are deemed irrelevant by the many students, and some felt like they did not have enough time to process the content of the course before moving on to the next. The opinion was that the course plan should be re-evaluated, both is relation to content and amount. In addition, there needs to be detailed course descriptions available in order for students to make informed decisions.

4. Many issues can be resolved without a complete restructuring, and by simply following the study plan, and allowing more leniency within the existing system. The tutors have academic responsibility for the student, and should therefore be able to have executive authority to work out a customised plan for them.

5. There is a need for clearer and more open communication between students and the faculty.

Below follows a more detailed description of the points discussed.

Heavy course load to the detriment of project development

Students feel like there are far too many courses, and that this hinders the development of their projects. There is no opportunity to test or exercise what one has learned in the courses. Many also feel that the program is designed on a "one size fits all" basis and there is no opportunity to design ones own process. Given the tight course schedule, students do not have sufficient time in the workshops. There is no time to let the project breath or simply test and experiment on ones own. The students want more independent project development time. It was also questioned wether of not courses can even be said to be obligatory. In the study plan it says that courses are not mandatory, and thus they cannot be said to be so.

Restructuring

It became very evident in the meeting that most people are not entirely sure about what the structure of the master program is. 30 ETCS are gained by successful semester evaluation, and this, in addition to the final exam, then amounts to the 120 ETCS that form a masters degree. But what amounts to a successful semester evaluation? Are the successful completion of all courses necessary to fulfill the demands, or does one gain it by achieving the learning objectives of the semester? There is contrasting information on whether courses can be made obligatory of not. People cant see a clear structure in the courses and program as a whole.

It seems like many people want a clearer structure at the program level, in order to make it easier to have more freedom at the individual level. It was brought up by several members of the evaluation that the master program needs more structure and clear guidelines. This to ensure a standard of how much time the students should have for independent work, and how many courses they should attend. Within each semester there should be a clear standard of how much time is allocated to what.

Several different models were mentioned as possibilities. Below are some examples of structures that were *discussed*, but **not agreed upon**.

Signing up for courses
For example, a structure where the default is that you are not signed up for courses, but in co-operation with the tutor the student signs up for courses that would be relevant for the project. You gain 30 ETCS at the semester evaluation where your tutor concludes that you have achieved the learning objectives for the semester, regardless of how many courses you have attended. It is up the the student themselves to achieve the learning objectives.

Specific ECTS point allocated to courses
A semesters work should add up to 30 ECTS. As of today, specific points are not allocated through certain courses, but all 30 ECTS given at the end of the semester through an end-of-term evaluation. One possibility could be that 15 of these come from courses, and 15 from independent work on your projects. This could also just be a guiding principle, that about 50% of the semester should be course-based, and 50% independent project work.

Some are sceptical to a structure where courses have specific ECTS point values, as this might restrict academic freedom and the autonomy of the students.

Obligatory courses and field-specific electives
It was also mentioned that one could have a grouping of courses - some that are general and need to be taken by everyone, and then some electives. These electives could be more field specific and for example come in different categories - e.g. "experimental learning", "methodology", and "theory". A possibility of a structure is where you have to have one course from each category in order to pass your semester (e.g. "you need one blue course, one red course, and one yellow one.."). This can be implemented without the official points attached to each course.

Universal for all the these possible solutions would be *a need for a clear, precise and detailed course catalogue*, which the students could review ahead of time in order to make informed decisions for their projects.

It was also underlined by many that a complete restructuring of the program could be potentially damaging and that many of these concerns can be addressed simply by adding to leniency within the existing structure. Especially since there seems to be some *urgency* in the matter. The main request seemed to be respect for different types of design processes, more time to focus independently, and a predictability in the structure of the program.

The main point for the students was a *need for more independent time* to work on the project and implement knowledge gained from courses. This could also increase how valuable the courses are to the students projects.

Out of balance

Another point that was referred to multiple times was the disproportional weighting of theoretical/ thinking courses over the practical/profession-based courses. Many felt like this was wrong since design is a field where honing practical skills is necessary. It was discussed that theory and methodology is also an important part of design and our profession. People understand that there is a clear link between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge, but request a better balance, or at least leniency for those that want to focus on one (or the other). There needs to be respect for both ends of the spectrum. There is a need for more autonomy within ones project.

Some expressed a need for more profession-based courses. Maybe there could be a set percentage for each type of course. The theoretical courses should be made easier to translate into practice, and there needs to be time to do so. Students pointed out that maybe if there was cleared communication on how more theory-based courses could be implemented in practice, some of the frustrations would dampen. It was also discussed that in our field it is hard to distinguish what we refer to as theory and practice. This might we worth exploring further.

Relevancy of course content

Many (not all) students feel the courses are not relevant for the project or professional development. Some also felt that courses take up too much time proportionately to what one gains from them, and that many of them could be merged into one, shorter course.

The forum concluded that it would be logical to ask the student to categorise or somehow evaluate which courses had been valuable for them, so the Institute could get a clearer picture of what is working and what is not.

Making of the course plan

It was discussed that making of the course plan needs to be more of a joint effort between the Master Program Coordinator, the *Emneansvarlig* and the students, in order to ensure relevancy and transparency. Tutors need more information on what courses their students go through in the course of the semester. It made also prefaced that "Emneansvar" for students should rest with the tutors.

It was also prefaced by students that once the students have reviewed the content of the course, it should not be subject to changes in requirements and assignments. There also needs to be clarity on what is included in the Design in Context bulk.

Communication & Roles

There is a need for more uniform communication and set procedures in order to minimise confusion and disinformation. It should be very clear to the students what each of the faculty and administrations roles are. The structure and end-goal of the master should also be clearly communicated to the students from the start. Information about courses and procedures should be given well ahead of time.

An effort to conclude

In conclusion, people agreed that if one simply followed the study plan, where it is emphasised that tutors have the main academic responsibility for the students and that the master program is an independent project, many issues would be resolved. There needs to be a higher degree of freedom and independence for the students. There needs to be more time to implement learnings from courses, and more time for independent project work. There needs to be a clearer structure to the program. There needs to be a more democratic process in making the course plan, and both student and tutors should be involved. And there need to be a revaluation of course content and types of courses. Communication between students and faculty/administration should be improved.

List of specific issues from students:

- **Many of the Courses don't contribute positively to the development of our master projects and as our development as a designer.**

  - Some of the course assignments do not relate to our master project or to professional development.

  - The ability to talk to your tutor about the courses was then confounded by the lack of transparency within the course and schedule.

  - Valuable time for our project development was sacrifice for what we were told we're required assignments.

  - The semester is overbooked with to many courses

  - The courses themselves are too short, so there is not enough time for reflection and depth if necessary

  - Some courses are too writing heavy and consume too much valuable time for practice in design.

  - Courses should also be about professional development, and could be taught by leaders in the design community to give relevant context.

- **Confusion about the schedule and course descriptions which add issues in the ability to plan ahead.**

  - The course descriptions and schedule are not given early enough in advance. This doesn't give the student time to prepare and to plan the semester as best it can and for the best of their master project.

  - Unclarity of the schedule is causing conflict with our ability to have time to work during the business day when facilitators and resources are available. ¨

  - Some course description changes many times during the semester.

  - The scheduling of the courses tend to come at a time that feels too late for relevance in the master project.

  - Examples:

    - Mapping course should have been specific to the thesis project or done in the previous semester.

    - Writing course was the same week as the due date for the thesis, is maybe not the best way.

- **There is a lot of confusion around what is and is not mandatory.**

Why:

  - There is a lack of clarity on the rolls of the student coordinator and the tutors. Who decides what is mandatory and not?

  - The clarity about the supervisor's role is not described well enough in the student program and, the same applies to the semester evaluation

  - There should be a better description on what is mandatory for passing the semester and also graduation.

  - We need clarity on the weight of what each element is worth in the scheme of the program.

  - Information available online from the school needs to be updated and agreed upon by everyone.

- **Students feel that there is an imbalance in the program towards writing and thinking instead of practicing, prototyping, testing.**

  - Students would like more freedom to mold their study program.

  - Students appreciate the diversity of projects from their classmates and would like to encourage this variety.