Defining my place in the program: Alignment of methodological progression in social science BA-educations

TLHE project: Jonas Toubøl & Stine Møllegaard, Department of Sociology.

Motivation: The main goal of BA-programs is to provide the students with the fundamental knowledge, skills and competences of the given discipline, typically achieved by mainly providing mandatory courses covering these topics. The programs are designed to generate high progression on part of the students' academic competencies in order to prepare them for specialization at the master's program as recommended by for instance the American Sociological Association (Grauerholz and Gibson 2006: appendix A).

Tight alignment between the courses in the program is necessary to achieve this progression (Sweet et al. 2014; Berheide 2005). Formally, the defined learning goals set by the study board secures this alignment. However, typically the individual lecturer has ample room to adjust her courses to changes in resources allocated to the courses or to her own research interests and competencies. Little is known about how these individual adjustments are communicated between course coordinators and how they influence the overall alignment of the BA-program.

The progression and quality of the BA- program rests on two essential types of coordination: firstly, information on how the competencies developed in one's own course relate to competencies developed on courses sequentially prior to and following the course in question (*within-course stream coordination*), and secondly, a clear understanding of the role of their course and how it relates to other courses course streams (e.g. theory courses) in the overall BA-program (*between-course stream coordination*).

Objective: Our respective experiences of taking on responsibility for core methods modules on the BA suggest a lack of dialogue and coordination between the course coordinators. The aim of this TLHE project is to develop a course coordination tool (CCT). The CCT would allow individual course coordinators to ensure the purpose of their particular course is aligned with the overall programme and that their adjustments does not hinder optimal learning of the students. It would also allow the course team to easily survey and review the alignment between the courses in a social science BA-programme. This would enhance the progression of our students' learning and competencies, and ensure high quality teaching and coherent programme development within higher education. Our aim it to develop a course coordination tool (CCT) which allows:

- Individual course coordinators to ensure the purpose of their particular course is aligned with the overall BA-program
- Individual lecturers to adjust the course with respect to research interests and competencies while maintaining optimal learning of the students.
- The course team to easily survey and review the alignment between the courses in a social science BA-programme.

Appendix:
1) CCT TLHE project - Project description.pptx
2) CCT TLHE project - Survey.pdf

References

Berheide, Catherine White. 2005. "Searching for Structure: Creating Coherence in the Sociology Curriculum" in, *Teaching Sociology*, 33(1): 1-15.

Grauerholz, Liz and Greg Gibson. 2006. "Articulation of Goals and Means in Sociology Courses: What We can Learn from Syllabi." In, *Teaching Sociology*, 34(1): 5-22.

Sweet, Stephen, Kevin McElrath and Edward L.Kain. 2014. "The Coordinated Curriculum: How Institutional Theory Can Be Used to Catalyze Revision of the Sociology Major" in, *Teaching Sociology*, 42(4): 287-297.

Defining my place in the program

Quality assurance and alignment of methodological progression in social science BA-educations

TLHE project

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Introduction:
The aim of BA-programs

- The main goal of BA-programs is to provide the students with the fundamental knowledge, skills and competences of the given discipline.

- This goal is typically achieved by providing mandatory courses covering these topics.

- The programs are designed to generate high progression of the students' academic competencies in order to prepare them for specialization at the master's program.

- Tight alignment between the courses on the BA-program is necessary to achieve this progression.

- Formally, the defined learning goals set by the study board secures this alignment.

Introduction:
Alignment and progression requires careful coordination

- The progression and quality of the BA-program rests on two essential types of coordination:

  - *Within-course stream coordination*:
    Information on how the competencies developed in one's own course relate to competencies developed on courses sequentially prior to and following the course in question.

  - *Between-course stream coordination*:
    A clear understanding of the role of their course and how it relates to other course streams (e.g. theory courses) in the overall BA-program.

Introduction:
With room for adjustments

- Typically, the individual lecturer has ample room to adjust her courses to changes in resources allocated the course or to her own research interests and competencies.

- Little is known about how these individual adjustments are communicated between course coordinators and how they influence the overall alignment of the BA-program.

Main challenge/problem:

- Our respective experiences of taking on responsibility for core methods modules on the BA suggest a lack of dialogue and coordination between the course coordinators.

- Can we develop a tool that ensures alignment and coordination between courses while maintaining the room for adjustments for the individual lecturer?

Aim of this project

Our aim it to develop a course coordination tool (CCT) which allows:

- Individual course coordinators to ensure the purpose of their particular course is aligned with the overall BA-program

- Individual lecturers to adjust the course with respect to research interests and competencies while maintaining optimal overall learning of the students.

- Individual lecturers to adjust the course with respect to changes in resources allocated to the course while maintaining optimal overall learning of the students.

- The course team to easily survey and review the alignment between the courses in a social science BA-programme.

This would enhance the progression of our students' learning and competencies, and ensure high quality teaching and coherent programme development within higher education.

Developing a course coordination tool (CCT)

Mapping and aligning course content according to competence-profile of the BA-program:

1. What do we teach/students learn in the specific courses of the BA-program?

2. How do the specific courses build upon previous courses? Assumptions of existing competencies among the students.

3. How do the specific courses prepare the student for the following course?

4. How do we align the courses and avoid gaps between course contents?

The challenge when adjusting individual courses

```
        input  ←──  What competences are we
                    assuming the students possess
                    when the course begins?

                    Depends on course content in
                    previous courses

        Course

        output ←──  What competences are we
                    assuming the students possess
                    when the course ends?

                    Feeds into the following course
```
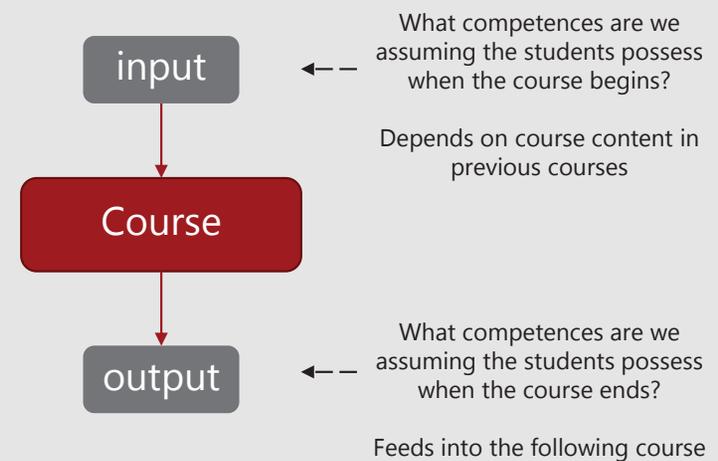
Overview of the courses in the Sociological BA program
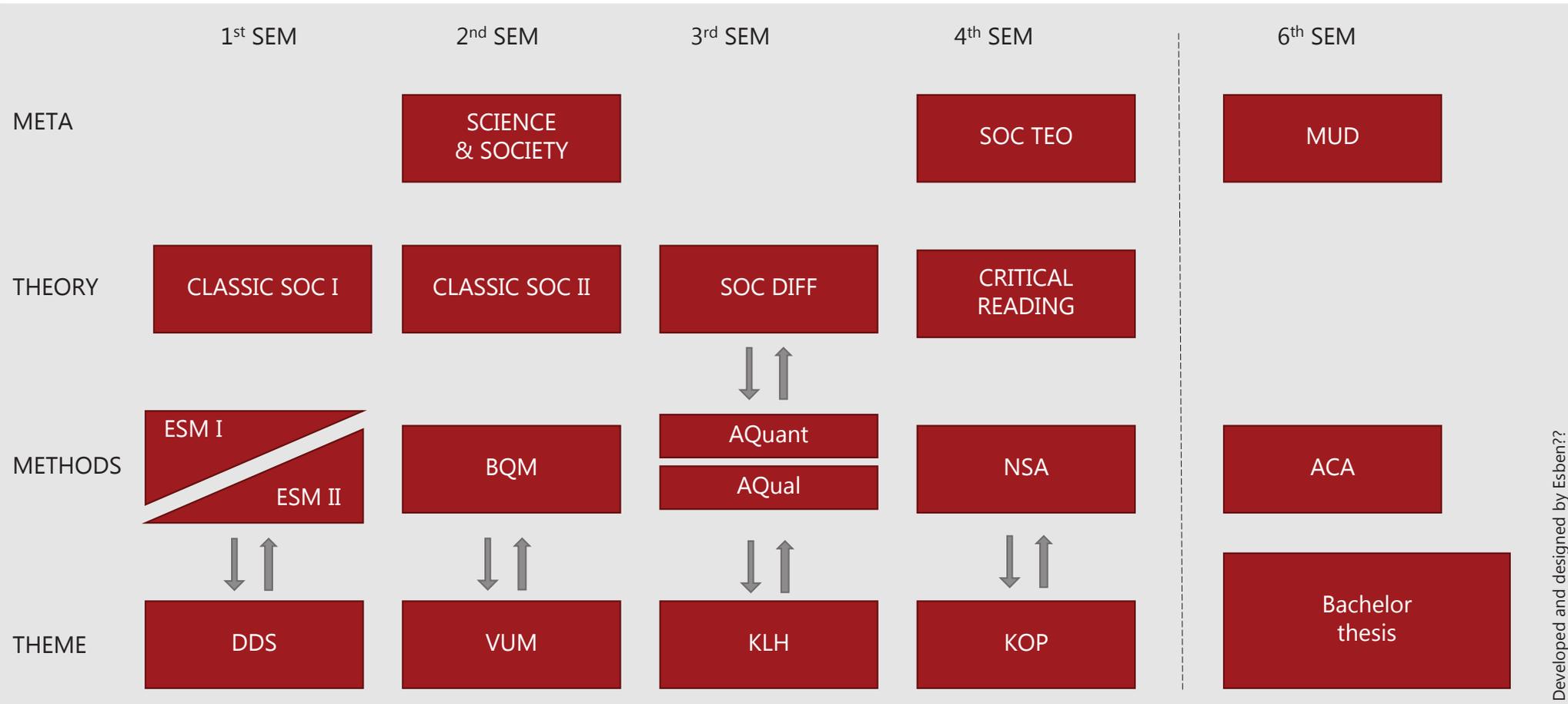
	1st SEM	2nd SEM	3rd SEM	4th SEM	6th SEM
META		SCIENCE & SOCIETY		SOC TEO	MUD
THEORY	CLASSIC SOC I	CLASSIC SOC II	SOC DIFF	CRITICAL READING	
METHODS	ESM I / ESM II	BQM	AQuant / AQual	NSA	ACA
THEME	DDS	VUM	KLH	KOP	Bachelor thesis

Developed and designed by Esben??

ESM = Elementary sociological methods, BQM = Basic Quantitative Methods, AQant/AQual = Advanced Quantitative and Qualitative Methods, NSA = Newer Statistical Analysis, ACA = Applied Case Analysis.
5th semester has no obligatory courses and is often the semester where the students study abroad.

Our focus in this TLHE
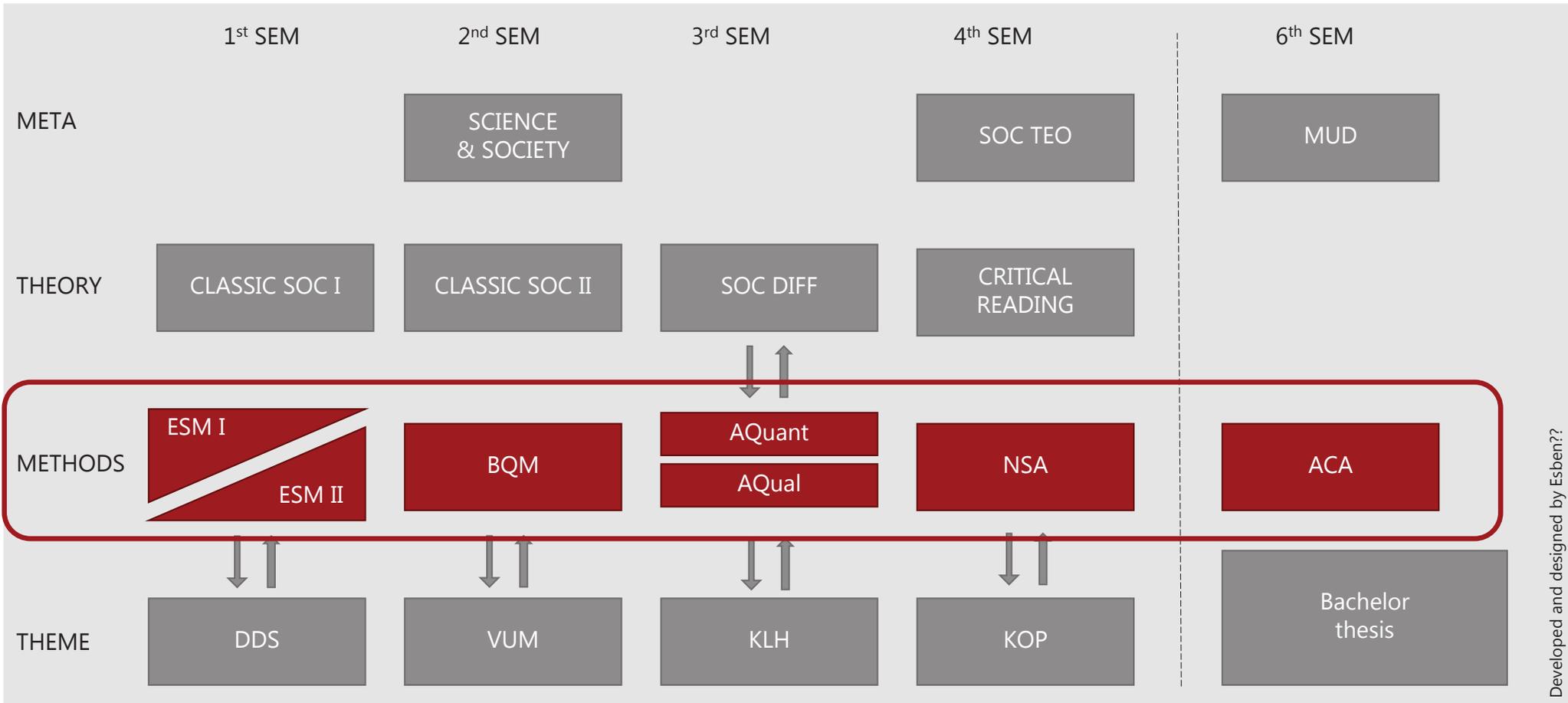
	1st SEM	2nd SEM	3rd SEM	4th SEM	6th SEM
META		SCIENCE & SOCIETY		SOC TEO	MUD
THEORY	CLASSIC SOC I	CLASSIC SOC II	SOC DIFF	CRITICAL READING	
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Developing CCT: Mapping and aligning course content

Four steps of developing the CCT:

1. Develop survey tool mapping:
    - Skills/competencies required for each course and on what level.
    - Skills/competences developed in each and on what level.

2. Mapping and redistributing overview of skills/competences taught in each course.

3. Meeting course coordinators/teachers.
    - Do the courses align and feed into each other?

4. Optional: Revise course content and course overview.

CCT step 1: Develop survey

The survey (example to the right and attached) provide a simple method of summarising a course with regards to:

1. Prerequisite and outcome competencies related to *method skills, design,* and *generic.*

2. Expected level the prerequisite competencies the student should master at course start.

3. Expected level of outcome competencies the student should develop during the course.

Rather than following categories of learning goals, we intentionally provided categories central to methods courses, in order to stimulate not simply listing the learning goals but describe the specific competencies in greater detail.

Course:		Teacher:	
Comeptencies	**Prerequisits**		**Outcomes**
Method skills	None Basic Advanced	None Basic Advanced	
e.g. "Interview transcription"	X		X
Design	None Basic Advanced	None Basic Advanced	
e.g. "Variable operationalization"	X		X
Generic	None Basic Advanced	None Basic Advanced	
E.g. "References"	X	X	

CCT step 2: Survey of course coordinators/teachers

Mapping skills/competences:

- Each course coordinator/teacher completes the survey of their respective courses.
- The completed surveys are then circulated to all course coordinators/teachers in the course stream.

As preparation for step 3, the meeting of course coordinators and lecturers:

- The course coordinators/teachers are asked to go through the surveys and identify potential problems and opportunities for improved alignment

CCT step 3: Meeting – Do courses align?

Two rounds of meetings:

1. All course coordinators/teachers discuss overall integration/alignment of the courses.
    - Design and generic skills central to these discussions.
    - Conclusions are drawn and appropriate action decided upon.
    - Appointing specific persons to take the next steps
      (e.g. approaching the head of studies, study board, invite a follow up meeting)

2. Course coordinators/teachers of closely connected courses meet in smaller groups
    (e.g. the quant and qual course coordinators meet separately) to optimize
    alignment of competencies.
    - Skills dimension will be central to these discussions.
    - Conclusions are drawn and appropriate action taken.

CCT step 4: Revising courses #1

Gaps and potentials were identified, some examples:

Round 1:
- Competencies of identifying and solving problems for particular organizations were weakly represented until 6th semester.
  - ➤ "Communication is lacking. I haven't even heard about it [two courses no longer integrated] and I'm responsible of coordinating quant courses." – Senior colleague #3
- The importance of exam integration between methods and theme/theory courses were emphasized
  - ➤ "Students should not only learn methods, they should learn how to apply them at relevant problems" - Senior colleague
- The importance of student instructors were emphasized and some level of student instructors in all courses was top priority.

CCT step 4: Revising courses #2

Gaps and potentials were identified, some examples:

Round 2:

- Qualitative courses aligned curriculum as well as adjusting overlaps in the content covered to ensure integration and optimal progression.
  - ➤ "The problem is that I was not well informed or good at discussion how to avoid overlap. That resulted in the students experiencing too much overlap. It's important for the Department that there is a dialogue about potential changes to a course when a new lecturer takes over" -Senior colleague #2
- Quant-methods course on second year of bachelor programme had to cut a topic in curriculum due to cuts in funding – this created a gap in the third year quant course
  - ➤ "Cuts in funding cuts down on teaching – I had to remove logistic regression from the curriculum entirely" -Senior Colleague #1
- As a result, Quant-methods course was allocated more resources for teaching assistants
  - ➤ "It's a big problem that there are no teaching assistants in the Quant courses. The students write about it in the evaluations of the Qual-courses, must be a big problem for the students!" -Senior colleague #2

Evaluation of CCT #1

The tool was designed to spark communication and to ensure alignment and facilitate student learning

How did course coordinators/teachers like the tool?

- General agreement in the group that the CCT is a good initiative:
  - ➢ "Good initiative! I have myself experienced the students commenting on too much overlap between our courses" – Senior colleague #2
- A few reported some difficulty in completing the survey at first, helped with some examples. Some simplification of the tool may be necessary
  - ➢ "I had a little difficulty filling out survey at first, but after seeing an example, it was much easier. "
- No complaints about the task being to much work.

Evaluation of CCT #2

How did course coordinators/teachers like the process?

- The heuristic survey tool was very popular: Completing the survey was in itself enlightening, and reading each others was useful to provide a quick overview and identify potentials for improvement.

  ➢ "The tool is really usefull for the following dialogue. It is a good conversation starter. Really good way of mapping our courses before we meet and talk." – Senior colleague #1

- Easily facilitated a space for sharing experiences and views about the program, appeared to be of great benefit in itself. Open and honest discussions.

- Participants asked early on for more meetings like these, maybe one per semester

  ➢ "Would be a really good idea if we had meetings in the quant/qual line maybe every semester to adjust and keep up with what's going on on the different course." – Senior colleague #1

Evaluation of CCT #3
- Follow-up

How to follow up and evaluate course coordination and alignment as result of CCT process?

- To maintain frank, open and constructive collegial atmosphere we recommend *not* to implement formal, bureaucratic evaluation systems

- The process will be repeated bi-annual where teachers will follow up on developments by virtue of CCT

- Micro-coordination, evaluation and follow-up will be coordinated in the step 2 dyadic meetings

- We suspect that going through this exercise will result in more ongoing coordination being initiated

Evaluation of CCT #4
- Other highlights

A few additional contributions were identified in the feedback from peers and colleagues:

- The graphical illustrations, survey questionnaire and clear structure of the process made the concept, its goals and the process very tangible

- The CCT process both benefitted seasoned and especially new lecturers

- A couple of peers from other departments suggested that they would like to see the CCT implemented in their programmes
  - This also suggests that the CCT with few modifications like simplification of the survey instructions removal of sociology specific references would be transferable to other disciplines.

- It was suggested that heads of studies should ensure the tool routinely were offered to any new lecturer entering a programme for her/him to initiate the process

Summary and conclusion of TLHE project

Motivation:

- How to ensure progression and alignment of course content while allowing for individual adjustments of courses?

We designed a tool to map and create overview of:

- Skills and competencies required for and developed in each course and on what level.
- Within three categories: Methods, Design, and Generic skills.
- To be completed by individual course coordinators/teachers.
- Redistribute the completed forms in the group.
- Meet and discuss alignment and coordination, potential gaps and opportunities.

Goal:

- Ensure alignment and progression in BA programme, increase student learning, maintaining individual freedom in courses, while easily uncover potential gaps and potentials for improvement.

Summary and conclusion of TLHE project

Evaluation:

- Generally very positive feedback – and it was quick and easy.

- Worked as intended: Sparked open and honest conversations about alignment, overlap, and gaps in between-course contents.

- Form might need some work: Examples helped greatly for participants to fill out survey.

Can it be generalized to other topics?

- While we initially intended it to be used on any course stream, we realize that the survey tool has to be adjusted to topic of course stream to work well.

- But when developed, they can be used yearly/bi-yearly to generate more communication across courses between course coordinators/teachers.

- A little work that holds a lot of potential.

Methods course prerequisit and outcome overview tool

The below form to be filled out is intended as a tool facilitating deliberations among teachers aiming at optimizing integration, alignment and progression of the students' method competencies througout the BA-programme. The form is designed to provide an overview of 1) what prerequisites are expected of the students as well as 2) the intended learning outcomes with regard to comeptencies at a more detailed level than the general intended learning outcomes defined i the Study Programme for the BSc in Sociology. The tool is solely intended to be used among the teachers at their own initiative. It is not a regulatory or administrative tool, nor is it part of the Study Board's general oversight.

   The overview provided by the form is intended to be used as preperation for coordination meetings between methods teachers in order to develop and align their courses. This will especially be relevant when new teachers and new courses are introduced, but also the general development of the courses may affect expected prerequisites and intended outcomes as well as the level or depth of learning which in turn may be of consequence to other courses at the BA-programme. To be specific, the tool could be used as preparation for a yearly coordination meeting where all teachers fill a questionnaire pertaining to their own course and circulate them among all the teachers who thereby get an overview. In another scenario the tool could faciliate detailed coordination among the teachers at two closely related courses.

   The figure below provides an overview of the organization of the BA-programme focused on the methods courses. The grey arrows indicate the individual method courses integration with theme or theory courses at the same semester and the red arrows the longitudinal progression among qunatitave and qualitative methods courses respectively. It should be noted that this model is a simplification and in reality the integration is more complex. For instance, ERMS I and II basically relates to all the following methods courses. In addition, a number of competencies are relevant across the qualitative/quantitative divid like design, contents coding, case design, sampling, logics of inference etc.

ESM = Elementary research methods for the social sciences, BQuant = Basic Quantitative Methods, AQuant = Advanced Quantitative Methods, Aqual = Advanced Qualitative Methods, NSA = Newer Statistical Analysis, ACA = Applied Case Analysis.
5th semester has no obligatory courses and is often the semester where the students study abroad.
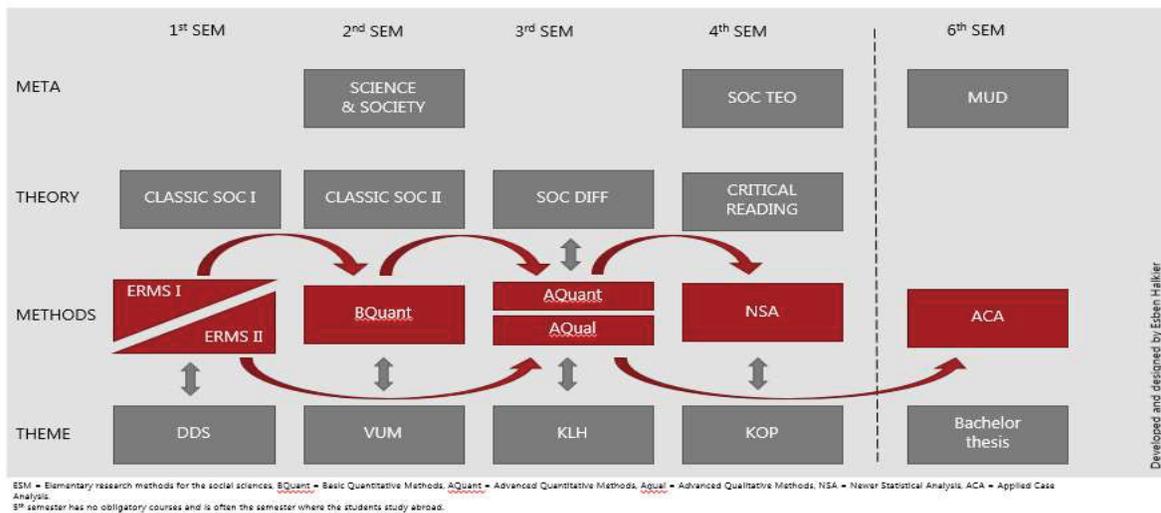
The below questionnaire has three overall columns. In the first left column you should list the competencies that are either prerequisites or outcomes to your current course. In the second and third columns you identify the level of competence. Thus, a competency might be only a prerequisit or an outcome. For example, at the introductory qualitative methods course it might be the case that students are expected not to have any experience with interview transcription but as an outcome of the course they acquire transcription competencies at an intermediate level.

   In order to make comparsion easier, competencies are divided into three general categories of 1) Skills (e.g. transcription, variable recoding in Stata, table design, Nvivo coding, IP recruitment, calculating mean values etc.), 2) Design (.e.g. variable operationalization, random sampling, case study logic, data triangulation, inductive inference, generalization etc.) 3) Generic (Referencing, organizing an essay, formulating reserach problems, research ethics, GDPR etc.).

Course:					Teacher:			

Comeptencies	Prerequisits				Outcomes			
Method skills	None	Basic		Advanced	None	Basic		Advanced
e.g. "Interview transcription"	X							X
Design	None	Basic		Advanced	None	Basic		Advanced
e.g. "Variable operationalization"		X					X	
Generic	None	Basic		Advanced	None	Basic		Advanced
E.g. "References"			X		X			