



Report from external evaluation panel: periodic evaluation of Master in Theology and Ministry

Introduction

This is the first periodic evaluation of the Master's program in Theology and Ministry (MATAM) which started in 2016. The panel found this an important and relevant offering within theology. The panel agrees that this program meets the requirements of national regulations and would like to recommend that it continues as an official accredited offering of the NLA University College.

The strength of this programme lies in the academic calibre of staff; the possibility of international engagement of the content offered and the possibility of critically engaged and socially relevant Christian leaders.

The core areas recommended for improvement are with regards to the alignment of the programme name with its outcomes; the internationalisation, subsequent recruitment strategies, alumni and offering students a mentor. These are further elaborated below.

1 Evaluation panel

- Shantelle Weber: Senior lecturer at the Faculty of Theology, University of Stellenbosch, South Africa. (Chairperson of the evaluation panel).
- Tor Erling Fagermoen: Regional Secretary IFES Europe and pastor, Bergen frikirke, former Bible School principal, Fjellhaug (Ministerial partner on the panel)
- Ragnhild Naterstad: Former MATM student (student voice on the panel)

2 Evaluation basis

- MATAM master in theology and ministry self-evaluation of the study program
- Study plan, MATAM master in theology and ministry, autumn 2020



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- Course descriptions for courses in the master's program.
- NLA- Strategic Plan 2021-2025
- Student evaluations of courses
- Two reports from former periodic evaluations of NLA's study programs

3 Evaluation feedback:

3.1 Programme description and learning outcomes

3.1.1 Name and outcome alignment of programme

- The name of a programme gives one an idea of the identity of the programme and the content that will be explored in that programme. The name guides the recruitment process through giving one an idea of the type of prospective student that the programme will draw. The current programme name does not clarify the above. This is further reflected in comments about the type of content offered or missing in this programme below.
- The outcomes of this programme state that specific focus will be on “developments within practical theology, biblical interpretation, spirituality, and missional ecclesiology in particular with repetition for focus in practical theology (outcomes 1, 3 & 5)” but this is not clear in the name. Is there any reason why the focus on practical theology is not specified?
- How does this programme align to NLA's vision & Mission departmentally and as institution?

3.1.2 Course descriptions within the programme:

- It is not clear from the course descriptions of individual modules how each outcome is met during that course. There are outcomes, assessments and evaluation criteria but it is uncertain which aligns to which outcome. In some instances, outcomes are written in quite cumbersome sentences.
- The content of each subject and the subjects in between complies with both academically and practically, what is referred to in the study program as its core:



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"a radical willingness to listen to the empirical reality as it is and a radical willingness to search for theological significance and response is a mark of Master in Theology and Ministry". However, there seems to be a gap in understanding varying denominational trends and traditions in view of critically reflecting on one's own. This is touched on in the TAM303 module on spirituality and TAM304 but seems limited. This would be essential when students encounter multi-cultural and ecumenical ministry environments and for Masters program focussed on international ministerial experience and engagement.

- According to the self-evaluation report; recruitment is focused on European students who have a passion for theology, ministry and leadership yet the traditional Bachelor of Theology degree (with biblical languages) is not the prioritised entry point. Are those in ministry not required to have completed this? The course LEC321 states "Knowledge of Biblical Hebrew and/or New Testament Greek" as prerequisite. How do these requirements align?
- When it comes to the structure of the programme, the committee would like to highlight the necessity of the weekly coursework requirements. For a study programme with little attendance and great freedom, it is important to set some requirements that ensure continuity of study progression. It would be of great benefit to students' academic progression to expect some higher demands on these assignments, as correct citations and other formal requirements that must be complied with in exam answers and in the master's thesis.
- This study is said to be especially relevant for church-planters, but church-planting seems not to be reflected in the programme.

3.1.3 Assessments within this programme:

- The assessments seem to all be written in format (with only one oral examination). There seems to be opportunity for an internship for students within the Norwegian church doing the catechesis module (which is an elective) but practical experiential learning towards professional training seems a gap. The STUDIPLAN MATAM doc does not stipulate Internships / Practice experience as



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teaching or assessment method for this programme yet this has been highlighted as a teaching modality for one module is the SER?

- Reading lists vary – are these aligned to the credit value of each module? How many pages of reading accounts for the notional hours spent in alignment with all other hours spent on each course?

The panel's recommendations:

- Name of the programme:
The solution may not be to change the name, but rather to work on finding a formulation so pointed that it can be understood, owned and shared by the lecturers and students. Perhaps a subtitle? As it stands it is too broad and lends itself to most of the questions related to content and recruitment in this report.
- Content:
 - Perhaps an elective course focusing on the gap in understanding varying denominational trends and traditions and church planting?
 - Greater creativity in assessment methods employed toward critical engagement of the student.

3.2 Leadership, academic community and research

3.2.1 Academic community:

As noted in the introduction, this programme seems to offer highly qualified teaching staff. The following serve as questions to reflect on how the optimal use of such academics may be employed in the future:

- The self-evaluation report reflects a large number of academics teaching in this programme. How does this affect the costing of the programme?



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- This report also states that “Some of the scholars do not have formal qualifications in university pedagogy” – this seems evident among student feedback which found gaps in the academic competence of the teaching staff.
- How does this programme align academic leadership and lived leadership? The teachers are experienced to have a good "real-life experience" with relevant experience, but it seems a missing element in this programme is greater opportunity for experiential learning with students as noted in the section of assessments above.
- From what theological perspective are these academics teaching? – What is the ecumenical nature of this programme and for which it is aimed. It seems Pentecostal voices are absent? This seems evident in the course readings too (this should be aligned to our remarks on the name and course description above).
- Lydia van Leersum-Bekebrede’s name is not listed on the academic community list in the self-evaluation report

3.2.2 Research

- Research methodology seems to be an area for improvement as reported by students. What role does the “closely associated research group” play with this cohort? Students are encouraged to attend gatherings with relevant research groups during teaching weeks on campus but it seems clarity of academic writing is required. From a student’s point of view, there is a lack in clarity in the presentation and teaching of academic methods. If teaching and training in methods are to be embedded in the courses from the first year on, and not as a preparatory course for the master's thesis, you may want this to be pointed out and clarified even more for the students. Perhaps it can be incorporated to a greater extent as a requirement for (some) of the weekly submissions?
- The self -evaluation report states that students have “allowances to do written work in Norwegian.” – How are these assessed by non-Norwegian faculty?
- Master thesis – It is not clear whether the specialisation of this thesis should be in practical theology or any theological discipline. The outcomes focus on



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practical theology as seems most of the modules' content. In this regard the panel do not see a module focussed on research methodology other than the one taught by prof. Peter Ward.

The panel's recommendations:

- A module focussed on research methodology including expectations for written assessments
- Increase in the experiential practical hours in this programme:
We would like to recommend a closer collaboration with Free Churches, Mission Societies, NLA partners toward an integration of practical hours/assessments connected to the module content offered in this programme.
 - For example; there is a huge need for in-field research around in the mission-field of secularized Europe. Who are the ones we as a church is trying to reach who are not currently church-goers. Is there resistance to the gospel in the various age groups? If so – why? What does the relevant church-planting literature recommend if one is to start up afresh in new areas or to go into unreached cultures in areas where churches already exists? What about the internationals, first or second generation immigrants, many of them are believers, what bridges can be made in new church plants that also would help a much more smooth integration for many, and enrich everyone involved.
 - Another example would be exposing students to academic positions like research assistants.
- Addition of practitioner- based classes to this programme:
Here practitioners could be incorporated into formal lecture opportunities or students could be exposed to the above-mentioned practice based spaces



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(churches, organizations, etc.). This enhances engaged learning opportunities which should be included at Masters level.

- As part of NLA University College's strategy plan and in line with the fact that the MATM programme qualifies students for a PhD in practical theology, we recommend that there be consideration for the establishment of a PhD programme in the relevant field, possibly in collaboration with other institutions.

3.3 Relevance for society and working life

- Students report that the programme is relevant for working life and society. Its unique combination where one constantly seeks to think practically about theology and theological over practice, the students practice in assessing, analyzing, asking questions and exercising judgment in the face of general/societal as well as ecclesiastical questions and topics.
- It would have been helpful to have feedback from alumni from this programme to ascertain where they end up after completing this programme. The panel would have liked to know more about where alumni found themselves 2-5 years after the study. Did anyone of them go abroad and did they find the study helpful for their career abroad, either academic career or something else?
- The following reflections can be connected to comments on the name and course description above:
 - Looking at the literature and the curriculum it seems a bit limited when it comes to spiritual formation and what church “is”. There is always a danger for a study like this that it is so academic that it never leaves the building. This is another area for partnership with owner organisations looking at the needs if people are to be employed there. The only work



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placement in this study seems to be in the optional “kateket” part of the programme.

- Mental health issues are at the rise among young people especially. Society needs more programs, institutions and churches who are providing help to self-help surviving in the digital age. David Kinnaman and Barna institute has done research here that is very useful. This huge shift in society could is not reflected much in the program.
- Immigration is an area of huge challenges and opportunities. It is a great place for a study like this to empower and equip young people to engage in helping understanding and welcoming new cultures to their new homes.

The panel’s recommendations:

- Spiritual formation: May be relevant and an advantage if the students are offered a mentor throughout the programme who can be an interlocutor for current questions that arise throughout the programme. This might be strengthening for the students' preparation for working life, and especially useful for students who do not live near campus and thus have "natural" access to several of the teachers.
- We also recommend conversation groups similar to those in the PTL programme. In addition to strengthening unity in the group, this way of sharing life, study and faith has a unique ability to shape one as a person.

3.4 Internationalisation and recruitment

As mentioned in the introduction, this is one of the core areas of improvements we think this programme needs to make as it is not clear what makes it international



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(themes covered, student cohort, faculty, marketplace opportunities)? The following reflective questions apply here:

- The STUDIPLAN MATAM doc seems to have heavy European focus when considering the “Purpose and content” for this programme. It is however not clear that much of the content is in the discipline of practical theology.
- In terms of the specific modules; it seems there is a lack of societal/developmental (diakonia) engagement and globalized/ contextual theology. Where these modules chosen on the basis of the Norwegian partner’s needs or on the desire to engage international students?
- This same doc states that “The student group will most likely represent a blended and international environment of inter-cultural learning.” – How has this cohort been reached?
- What does the recruitment strategy for this programme entail?
- What is NLA aiming for when it comes to numbers of students? It is marketed as an international programme, but there is not stated anything about the allocative key for international student vs. Norwegian students.
- The above does not seem to align to the targeted group stipulated on the STUDIPLAN MATAM document which states that:
 - Graduate-students seeking education and qualification for positions in churches or Christian organizations
 - Graduate-students seeking to fulfill the admission requirements of PhD-programs in practical theology
 - Employees in churches or Christian organizations desiring supplementary training at master level
- Postgraduates aiming at a second career in Churches or Christian organizations
- This version has no entrepreneurial focus as stated in the Self Evaluation Report.
- Does NLA have a recognition of prior learning process? – this would apply to those who have much ministerial, social and entrepreneurial experience but do not meet the core academic admission requirements. This would also consider



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the age of these applicants. Seems credits are given for some experience in the admission requirements and acknowledged in some of the module prerequisite knowledge eg. TAM301.

- It seems the average class size is 7 students. Has the programme been set up to only take a maximum of 10 students? If so, has this been communicated in recruitment drives? If not, how can this number be increased?
- The self – evaluation report reflects that “in earlier years UK and Norway pastors attending for continuous education” – Why has this stopped?
- From this report, it seems a current recruitment strategy relies on student exchanges with three specific institutions (South Africa, UK, Netherlands). How do we focus on students who are not already in existing Masters programmes and extend access to higher education globally?

The panel’s recommendations

Module content:

- Adding societal/developmental (diakonia) engagement and globalized/contextual theology
- Including Non-European prescribed texts, students and faculty

3.5 Student throughput & learning environment

- The evaluation panel requested more information on the throughput rates of this programme as these were not included in the initial evaluation pack. From the data provided, it seems the numbers of students enrolled for this programme have grown from 4 in 2016 to 18 in 2020 but the pass/completion rates have been inconsistent. It seems that the most students having completing this programme was 50% in 2019.



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- Seems student feedback on the programme has not been consistent or successful – few feedback reports accumulated.
- Feedback on the Masters thesis (TAM350) indicates low success scores as students reflect on learning outcomes.
- The self-evaluation report mentions the relevance and upgrading of facilities to enhance student learning. It seems like that all students have to come to Norway to follow the education, at least for two weeks pr. semester. We question if it is possible to do this course virtually as an on-line study? Do all the students involved in this programme have the relevant software and digital tools to work from home? Are these learning environments hospitable spaces in which to flourish as an international students? Eg. How do non-Norwegian students get orientated and socialised into the programme?
- The panel questions how content learned in this programme get contextualized to varying international contexts?

The panel's recommendations:

- An intentional system of consistent student and alumni feedback
- Improved student support mechanisms to enhance throughput rates.
- It seems the self-evaluation report has noted the need to improve digital learning possibilities which the panel strongly supports for greater international access.

4. Final summary

This evaluation report highlights the need for the program co-ordinators to reflect on how the name of this programme and how its projected outcomes are read and understood by the prospective student and thereafter experienced as a candidate of this programme.



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As an international programme, careful consideration to the content (themes) and assessment methods offered in this programme as relevant to the ecumenical church and international community should be given. This is then further evidenced in who is attracted to this programme, how they are recruited and where they end up serving globally.

Varying recommendations have been made at specific points above. We would like to note a few last suggestions for future evaluations:

- Include sufficient student and alumni feedback
- Include at least 2 additional alumni on this panel (much pressure was placed on the 1 serving in this round).
- Consider the possibility of the panel conducting interviews with current students, alumni, academics & the program coordinator to clarify questions that arise.

It is against this background that this panel agrees that the Masters in Theology and ministry program can be re-accredited and continue in its present form.

Comments to the report from the department:

Periodic Evaluation Notes for MATM
September 2021

We have received the external periodic evaluation for our Master in Theology and Ministry program, and are glad that the evaluation panel concludes the degree should be continued. We are grateful for the external examiners' hard work and their feedback, and will do our best to respond in order to lift our program to excellence. What follows is a short overview and our response over items highlighted by the examiners.

Language:

The examiners wondered about requiring Biblical languages as admission criterion – either Greek and/or Hebrew – and our faculty did not think adding a requirement of Biblical languages aligned with the scope of our program. It was noted that there are students who participate in our program from the Master of Theology course -Candidatus Theologiae students - and they have a Biblical languages component in place already. We also think that adding Biblical languages as an admission criterion would reduce the number of potential students, both from NLA UC through BA in Practical Theology and Leadership as well as externally.



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Emphasis on Practical Theology:

The examiners noted that, although we articulate the foundation and importance of Practical Theology in our course description, they wondered about emphasizing this component more and perhaps adding it to the title, or creating a subtitle, of our program. As a faculty, we feel that practical theology is emphasized by teaching throughout our courses and adding it as part of our name is not in our best interest. However, it might be important for us to highlight this aspect of our program and hold ourselves accountable to clearly communicate the emphasis of this in our courses. This includes more active uses of the terms *theology* and *ministry* in the existing title, emphasizing that the MA is not meant to be a degree in Practical Theology only, but an innovative theological study at the intersection of traditional theology and the empirical reality of different types of ministry.

Research Methodology:

It was noted by the examiners that we needed to re-think our approach to teaching research methodologies in order to help our students succeed in creating and writing their masters' theses. We are not certain we have space in our curriculum at this point to add another course of instruction covering research methodologies, but one suggestion was to invite first year students, TAM 301 and 302, to the Research group in Theology and Ministry co-led by one of our professors Bård Norheim. This would enable those students to grasp the breadth and depth of research projects and approaches, as well as enable them to take steps towards deepening their learning. It should also be noted that we normally do sessions looking forward to the master's thesis during the intensive teaching weeks in the first, second and third semesters in order to help the students start the planning and research design of their thesis. We will work on making these sessions more visible in the course and study plans.

Diversity of Staff and Teaching Scope:

There was an important point the examiners made about the scope of our ecumenical and international profile of our program. While they pointed out that the staff was of European background, we as a faculty, failed to point out the diversity of our backgrounds in terms of nationalities as well as denominational background. However, the examiners also challenged our landscape of teaching and learning to make certain we include more Pentecostal churches/backgrounds, as well as international missions and ministries – including the background of our mission partners. It was suggested to include church planting/planters and understanding of varying denominational backgrounds. They emphasized we should include Free Churches and Mission Societies in our program. It should be highlighted here that NLA has just embarked on a four-year research grant that partners us with PAC University in Nairobi, Kenya as well as Stellenbosch University in Stellenbosch, South Africa where there will be an exchange of professors as well as students, thus enabling a more diverse approach to teaching and learning.

Miscellaneous:

There was a question about reading lists across our courses and it was taken up that we should coordinate our reading lists more closely. This aspect will be discussed for the courses of each semester in planning of the upcoming study years.

The external examiners questioned the scope of our on-line program, wondering if students have access to the resources they need in order to complete an on-line study. We have already been in discussion over the past months about the recommendations and expectations of in-person requirements for our course, also in connection to new signals from UDI (Utlendingsdirektoratet/The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration) concerning residence permits for non EU/EEC-students. We are in the process of considering the importance and the number of



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times it is required to be in-person on campus and we will be considering the possibility of either reducing the number of times students come to campus or going to a fully on-line program. Those discussions are on-going and need to be considered fully and deeply before final decisions are made.

We have noted the committee's suggestion about strengthening the alumni system, and we will work concretely on the contact with former students as a source of feedback on the degree and its relevance for work life and possible contact with future students, in connection to a new institutional structure for registration and contact with alumni to be implemented this fall.

The evaluation panel has also given many interesting suggestions about themes that could be highlighted in present courses and/or new (elective) courses, such as church planting, mental health, immigration, and diakonia. They will all be considered, but we will also need to take into account the total resources, academic competence of staff and current student numbers when deciding the breadth of courses we are able to run.

Sincerely,
Gretchen Schoon Tanis
Study program leader

Gunnar Innerdal
Head of department Theology, religion and philosophy