

Internal evaluation of the study programme in Modern and International History (MITRA)

Klaus Nathaus, 1st March 2023

The programme in Modern and International History (MITRA) is a two-year master's course that "offers a broad and global historical perspective on political, cultural, social and economic processes both between and beyond nation states" focusing on the period from the mid-19th century to the recent past. Launched in 2017, the programme takes up roundabout twenty full-time students each year to start in the autumn semester.

The following report offers an overview of the programme, looks closely at its structure and aims, assesses its results, and presents stakeholder feedback in view to adjustments. The report is partly based on the experience with the three cohorts of students who began studying in the programme in the years from 2017 to 2019. The academic performance and subsequent career steps provide us with data about the programme's efficacy in training skills to students that position them on the labour market. Supplementing this data, I have, in many cases together with student adviser Yngvild Storli, conducted stakeholder interviews with members of the two student cohorts that have recently finished their studies or are now in their second year, as well as with lecturers on the programme. These were organised as open-ended conversations in a group meeting or individually. In total, the stakeholder feedback amounted to about nine hours, a third of which with students. Further feedback by one lecturer and one student was sent in written form. Yet another source of information that informs this report are the minutes of the MITRA Program Council, which highlight issues that were raised during the five years the programme has been running.

The first part of the report briefly presents the larger goals of the programme and assesses to which degree these have been reached by the first student cohorts of MITRA. Two main findings can be taken from the graduate data. The first is that MITRA students have performed very well academically, both in view to average grades and top achievements. Among these achievements are a Fritt Ord stipend by the Norwegian Historians' Association (HIFO) for a master thesis submitted by a member of the first MITRA cohort in 2019 and the appointment of a handful of MITRA alumni to PhD positions at universities in Norway and abroad. The second finding is that MITRA graduates appear to be well positioned on the academic and non-academic labour markets.

In the second part of the report, I take the feedback from stakeholders to screen individual modules and check the coherence of the programme. The major recommendation of this examination is that MITRA's core, with its consequent focus on training its student in historical research, has produced good to excellent results and should be maintained and even strengthened. While major changes do not seem warranted, moderate and focused adjustments to the organisation of certain modules, the clarity, rationale, and progression of assignments, and the communication among staff and between staff and students are advisable in order to meet critical feedback from students and lecturers. They will help to make a very successful programme even better.

1. MITRA's learning aims, basic structure, and student performance

MITRA aims at training its students to become historians while also helping them to apply their analytical skills and raising their profile on the non-academic job market. To fulfil its academic learning outcomes, the programme offers a range of topical modules that allow students to explore in-depth political, economic, social, and cultural issues in modern international and transnational history and acquire skills to study them critically and independently. During their first two semesters, the MITRA cohort that started in autumn 2022 will meet 13 members of IAKH's staff who will introduce them to topics from migration and environmental history over tourism and trade to international politics and (de)colonisation. This has been similar for previous cohorts. Accompanying the topical modules, consecutive "research and writing training" seminars are offered in each of the first three semesters. They build upon each other and are devised to help students design their master thesis project, which they complete in the fourth semester with a 30-ECTS points thesis.

To give students an opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills to non-academic tasks, explore a career option, and gain visibility for potential future employers, MITRA provides them with the option to spend the third semester (or "field term") on an internship and helps them with finding and applying to a suitable host institution. Together with the Faculty of Humanities, the study administration and teaching staff facilitate contacts with several relevant institutions in Norway (primarily for students from outside of Norway) and abroad. To date, the list of host institutions that took in MITRA students as interns encompasses state institutions like Norwegian embassies, research organisations such as the Peace Research Institutes (PRIO) in Oslo and Cyprus, the Norwegian Institute in Rome, the state-controlled

energy company Equinor, and charities such as Borderline Europe, an NGO that advocates the protection of human rights at the EU’s external border. (A full list of host institutions for MITRA interns is attached to this report as Appendix 2.) During their internship, students have written a twenty-page “term paper/report” whose topic is negotiated between with the host institution. This gives students an opportunity to apply their skills in commissioned research.

The second alternative besides an internship is for students to work on a History Project. This project consists of a thirty-page term paper that is based on archival research outside Norway and that needs to be distinct from the master thesis project. We heard from stakeholder interviews with students that the History Project is sometimes thought of as a “Plan B” in case an internship plan fails to materialise. However, the History Project is neither intended as a secondary choice nor is it regarded as such by all students. In fact, some of the MITRA alumni with the best final mark have chosen the History Project as their preferred option and appear to have benefited from this experience when writing their master theses.¹ We learn from the conversation that we should strengthen the relative reputational value of the History Project as a sort of “academic track” in the programme. I will come back to this in the second part, where I look more closely at the “field term” module.

Based on the experience with four student cohorts who have completed the programme, we can confidently say that MITRA has been very successful in regard to its academic aims (see tables 1 and 2). Of the 81 students who enrolled in MITRA between 2017 and 2020, 53 registered to take the exam, of whom 48 passed to gain their master’s degree.

Table 1

Year	Total enrolment	Graduates of this cohort	Graduates who took longer than two years	Failed exam
2017	19	16	11	-
2018	16	13	3	1
2019	26	12	5	4
2020	14	7	-	1

¹ Lena Kelle, Siw Ellen Rysstad, Simen Eriksen Hustoft, Axel Julsrud, Marco Mazza, Morten Aune Forbord.

2021	24	-	-	-
2022	21	-	-	-

When looking at the completion rate, it looks as if the number of graduates began to decline with the cohort of 2019. However, it needs to be taken into account that quite a few students handed in their thesis later than two years after they enrolled, which means that we expect the number of graduates from the 2019 and certainly the 2020 cohort continue to rise. Throughout the time MITRA has run, a total of 19 students (more than a third of those who have taken the exam) have sought an extension of the deadline.

There are several possible explanations for students taking longer than two years to complete their studies or indeed drop out of the programme, which also happens, albeit to a lower degree than in other comparable programmes. One of the reasons for prolonging the period of study or leaving the programme is that students find employment during their studies and commit to that work fully. Parenthood is another reason why a few students either terminated their studies or took more time to complete them. Another important explanation for late submissions of dissertation is the fact that for foreign students, their residence status in Norway depends on being enrolled in a study programme. That this is a strong incentive for students to seek extensions has been confirmed by lecturers in MITRA and has also been observed in other study programmes with an intake of international students.

While these factors stem from the vagaries of life courses and lie outside of what the programme is able to influence, a last explanation for extensions may be that the time to write the thesis in the fourth semester can be very short for students who have not advanced their thesis project far enough to “hit the ground running” after the field term. Again, we have to rely on lecturers’ experience here; data is not available on this. However, bearing in mind that the field term, be it used for an internship or a History Project, is regarded by most students as among the most attractive parts of the programme, the only way to mitigate students’ time issues is to encourage them to think early on about the master thesis and provide them with opportunities to do so. I will come back to this issue in the second part of the report in connection to a number of first- and second-semester modules that are relevant in this regard. It should, by the way, be stressed that internships did not keep many students from submitting excellent theses after two years. Completing the programme successfully within the allocated time is challenging but entirely possible, as the figures indicate.

Looking more closely at the academic performance of those who have completed their studies, we see that MITRA students have achieved very good results. On average, theses produced in the programme were assessed as “very good” (B). Dissertations are assessed by a tandem of an internal and an external examiner who is specialised in the thesis topic.

Table 2

Year	A	B	C	D	E
2022 spring	3	4	2	1	-
2021 autumn	-	-	-	-	-
2021 spring	4	4	1	-	-
2020 autumn	-	1	1	1	-
2020 spring	6	4	1	1	1
2019 autumn	1	1	2	2	1
2019 spring	2	1	1	1	-

While one has to be careful to see higher marks as the immediate outcome of the study programme, additional information strongly suggests that students indeed reach a relatively high academic level. A thesis submitted in 2019 was awarded the Fritt Ord stipend by the Norwegian Historians’ Association (HIFO),² another one from 2020 was considered among the best submissions for this award by the HIFO jury.³ Five former MITRA students have now funded PhD positions in Norway, Germany, Italy, and Japan.⁴ The author of the award-winning thesis now works as a research assistant at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). An alumna from the subsequent cohort is now researcher (“forsker”) at the Institute for Defense Studies,⁵ another student of the first cohort is currently employed as a research assistant at the Department of Cultural Studies and Oriental Languages (IKOS) at UiO.⁶ We know of further students who aspire to a career in research after having completed the MITRA programme, as teachers on the course were asked to support these students with references.

² Mathias Hatleskog Tjønn, ‘The Persistence of Colonialism: A Century of Italo-Libyan Relationships and their Influence on the Current Mediterranean Migration Regime (1911–2017)’ (Master Thesis, IAKH (UiO), 2019).

³ Sigvart Nordhov Fredriksen, ‘Discovering Palestine: How Norwegian Solidarity with Palestine Emerged in the Transnational 1960s’ (Master Thesis, IAKH (UiO), 2020).

⁴ Lena Kelle (LMU Munich), Jonas Bakkeli Eide (EUI Firenze), Ragnar Øvergaard Aas (University of Oslo), Diego Alexander Salazar (University of Agder), Taymour Bouran (Sophia University Tokyo).

⁵ Vilde Opdan Yttereng.

⁶ Siw Ellen Lien Rysstad.

These excellent results suggest that during its short run, MITRA has already established itself as a seedbed for emerging historians and equipped talented researchers for pursuing a career in research. The success of MITRA alumni on a highly competitive academic job market may also speak for the value of the 30-ECTS-points master thesis: The shorter format does not seem to disadvantage their authors when applying for academic positions.

It is more difficult to gauge the extent to which non-academic goals have been fulfilled, partly because we lack comprehensive, longer-term data about the careers of MITRA alumni after graduation. A cursory Google search and two mails to alumni from the 2019 and 2020 cohorts, however, suggests that the MITRA years have been a step on the career ladder for its students. We find MITRA alumni as consultants (“rådgiver”) at the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI), the Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV), the Norwegian Research Council, the Nobel Institute, and in a city administration. Another alumnus is digital editor at the publisher Cappelen Damm,⁷ another one is with the national broadcaster NRK, where he contributes regularly to the news programme *Dagsrevyen*.⁸ Other former MITRA students work in internet publishing sales, for the software company Visma, and the games developer Paradox. Another one has won a highly competitive traineeship at the Ministry of Defence. At least four alumni are employed as teachers in Norwegian secondary schools.

One can think of a number of factors that have contributed to students’ achievements. To begin with, each MITRA student cohort appears to have developed a group identity, some years very clearly and strongly so, with members supporting each other in their academic work, but also socialising in their free time. Former programme director Daniel Maul has nurtured this feeling of belonging to the programme by initiating a MITRA film club, summer parties, and a “hyttetur” for incoming students. Covid has cancelled many of these activities, though students confirm that they still have found ways to get together as much as restrictions allowed. There have also been digital master classes under the pandemic, where established historians (Glenda Sluga, Heidi Tworek, Kiran Klaus Patel, and Quinn Slobodian) discussed their research with MITRA students online. As restriction have been lifted, the latest MITRA cohort started its studies with a hike to “Studenterhytta”.

In addition to the social aspect, the programme has been blessed with students who bring a great preparedness for intellectual engagement and useful experiences with them. So far, the

⁷ Sigvart Nordhov Fredriksen.

⁸ Simen Hunding Strømme.

English-speaking programme has attracted 36 students from outside of Norway, hailing from, Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, China, Colombia, Denmark, Germany, France, Greece, India, Ireland, Jordan, Lithuania, Mexico, Ukraine, Russia, Romania, Spain, Turkey, the UK, and the USA. In turn, several of the Norwegian-born MITRA students have studied or lived abroad.

While most MITRA students have great academic potential and are prepared to commit themselves to their study, none of them begins the programme already fully equipped to conduct independent research. All of them, especially the ones who do not have a background of bachelor studies in history, have to learn how to engage with historical scholarship and “do history”. This is what the programme appears to have done very effectively so far, judging on the basis of graduates’ overall academic performance. It seems fair to say that a large majority of MITRA students have improved their academic skills considerably during their studies, many of them to the extent that are qualified to continue as researchers.

Outside of individual modules, the MITRA programme organisers have not generated data to evidence overall student satisfaction. Instead of generating data through questionnaires or the like, we have sought the dialogue with them and encouraged and relied on students voicing concerns, either directly or through their representatives. The minutes to the Program Council evidence that students have used those opportunities. We as the programme organisers welcome this critique as it shows us that students truly have a stake in their studies. “Satisfaction” develops over time and is difficult to measure, though we may take excellent academic performance, strong and inclusive cohort identities, and personal investment in the programme as indicators that the programme does indeed generate lasting and meaningful satisfaction among its students.

2. The performance of individual modules and the coherence of the programme

In this second part of the report, I draw on stakeholder feedback to screen MITRA at the level of individual modules first, before I check for the coherence of the whole programme. The ongoing evaluation opens an opportunity to undertake careful adjustments, and so I formulate pinpointed changes to the organisation of certain modules and to assignments. The suggestions are made with the understanding that the core of the programme, with its focus on guiding students to engage with historiography and providing them with the skills to conduct independent research, has proven viable. Proposed changes are meant to strengthen this approach.

First Semester

MITRA4000 – Key Issues in Modern International and Transnational History

<https://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/iakh/MITRA4000/>

This course is run as a series of lectures or seminars (the exact format is left to individual lecturers of each session to decide). It aims at giving a “broad introduction to major issues in international and transnational history of the 19th and 20th centuries”. Taught by a team of lecturers who each teach a class on their relevant field of research (in autumn 2022, ten lecturers will be involved), the module is devised to show students the breadth of research in modern international and transnational history conducted at the department as well as introduce them to potential supervisors for a future master thesis. The term “key issues” refers to both central events and trends in international and transnational history during the period and to historians’ questions, concerns, and approaches to study them.

Students are assessed with a three-day take-home exam, where they answer a set question based on the pensum. Lists with further readings for each of the “key issues” are made available to students via the Canvas page of the course. Students may use these references for their exam papers or to explore a topic further in view to a possible master thesis project. To coordinate the team of lecturers, teachers were invited to a meeting at the beginning of the semester at which they were informed (again) about the rationale of the course, the student group, and – most importantly – shown the exam question, which gave them the opportunity to comment on it. In addition to the sessions that focus on “key issues”, an introductory meeting informs the students about organisational aspects and gets them thinking about the course, while the last session is devoted to exam preparation. Concepts of “international” and “transnational” history, which the contributors to the course are asked to touch upon in their sessions, are also talked about once more during the final meeting.

The lecture/seminar series is meant to balance breadth with depth and thus seems an adequate format to introduce students to topics and future supervisors. It allows for meaningful interaction between staff and students that goes beyond other established formats of supervisor presentations or thematic catalogues of potential thesis topics. Students should get a realistic impression of how a historian approaches a historical subject, which should help them in their search for a possible supervisor for their thesis.

Initially, MITRA4000 was planned to be “integrated” with the reading course, MITRA4001. Over the course of time, this integration has proved to be difficult to uphold in practice, as the content of both courses changed due to the staff that contributed to them and who made the course their own. In the present semester, I have therefore decided to delete the sentence on the course page that claims an “integration” between 4000 and 4001. In this way, students do not expect a particular connection between the courses, while lecturers responsible for the content are given freedom to organise classes in the way they seem fit.

To qualify for the exam, students have to submit two reflection papers à three standard pages (2,300 characters, no space) until a few days before the last “exam preparation” session. One of these papers is read and commented on by one of the lecturers on the course, preferably one who has taught the session the reflection paper refers to. In that way, the workload of giving feedback is distributed evenly, and many lecturers see what a student has retained from the session he or she has conducted.

A reflection paper is meant to bring the two to three obligatory readings for a lecture/seminar into conversation and conclude with the student’s own position in this discussion. Students are provided with an example of a reflection paper at the start of the course via Canvas. They are also taught how to write such a text in MITRA4001, where a reflection paper is submitted as part of the portfolio exam. For students who have done the reading and followed the seminar/lecture, writing a reflection paper seems an effective way to rethink a “key issue” once more by formulating central insights in one’s own words. This obligatory assignment also seems useful as a step towards the paper students write for their exam in MITRA4000, which should engage critically with historians’ approaches and interpretations, arguing with historical examples instead of just presenting factual knowledge about past events. Assignments in MITRA4000 are defined to be clear, build on another, and show a progression, all of which has been a major concern for recent adjustments to the study programme.

Lecturers on the programme have voiced different opinions about the form of the exam. To date, it has been organised as a take-home exam that gives students three days to answer a given question. The length of the paper is limited to eight to ten standard pages (including footnotes, excluding the bibliography). The exam question is formulated so that it gives students opportunities to draw on all themes presented in the lecture/seminar series and discuss past events and trends against the backdrop of historiography. The advantage of this format is that it incentivises students to attend all meetings and engage with the whole breadth of the

course content, as all of it is relevant for the exam. The downside may be that a three-day exam does not allow for a lot of further reading. Furthermore, the broad paper gives little space for in-depth exploration of an individual issue, which is also what is going to be demanded from the students in their master thesis. An alternative assignment that would open up for students' own questioning and reading would be a paper of 5,000 words that departs from one "key issue" and zooms in on a topic defined by the student themselves. A term paper like that has the advantage to be clear in its format (which is essential for a fair assessment) and in its purpose (which is to prepare students for the master thesis, an assignment that will also require students to formulate their own research question, research literature, define a case, and identify primary sources). Its downside is that students may pick "their" topic and ignore the rest of the course content. A third option that combines some of the strengths of both these formats could be to give students the exam question at the beginning of the course, giving them more time for reflection. Presently, we have decided to wait for the papers from the current cohort to see whether the exam format requires an adjustment.

MITRA4001 – Reading Course I: Key Issues in Modern International and Transnational History

<https://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/iakh/MITRA4001/>

This module consists of a reading course with six fortnightly meetings and focuses on a specific topic in international and transnational history. Presently, it is the field of population control, development policy, and public health. The module is taught by one lecturer. For each meeting, students read historical studies (mostly of article length) and present two extracts on two assigned texts on the penum as a draft to their students, which are then discussed in class. The main learning outcome of this course is to "be able to analyse and present scholarly debates" and critically discuss different interpretations. It is assessed by one extract and one reflection paper, which are judged as "pass" or "fail". Samples of an extract and a reflection paper are made available to students via Canvas.

The course format allows for students to develop their reading skills and fosters an understanding of historians' debate on a tightly defined research field. While the "key issues" module is taught by a large team, the reading course MITRA4001 is taught by a single lecturer. This secures continuity and allows for direct communication between the lecturer and the students. The format and scope of the course correspond with the learning outcomes and

should, in my opinion, be kept. Students have given this course and its lecturers (Sunniva Engh most recently, Daniel Maul and Marc Wiggam in previous years) very positive feedback, too.

The one detail I changed for the current semester is the claim on the website that this reading course is “integrated” with MITRA4000. It would be extremely difficult indeed to co-ordinate the two modules, given that the schedule of MITRA4000 is mostly defined by the question who is available on what day. Claiming an integration on the course page is bound to confuse students and staff alike.

MITRA4421 – War, Peace and the Nobel Peace Prize

<https://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/iakh/MITRA4421/>

This course consists of a series of eight lectures (given by Olav Njølstad) and seven seminar meetings (taught first by Patrick Bernhard, then Marc Wiggam, now by Ada Nissen). The seminar part has been taught in a similar way to the reading course MITRA4001, that is to say, by a single lecturer, based on her/his reading selections, with exercises s/he devised her/himself. Students who take the course are examined in a term paper of 5-6,000 words in which students take a Nobel laureate as a starting point to formulate a question relevant to research on the twentieth-century history of war, peace, and the Peace Prize.

Since its inception, the co-ordination between the lectures and the seminar-part of the course has been a challenge because Njølstad is, while willing to co-operate with the department for this course, also somewhat remote from IAKH as the Director of the Norwegian Nobel Institute and secretary of the Nobel Committee. Over the years, the arrangement has developed in a way that Njølstad supplies lectures (presently eight) that follow the story of international politics for peace through the lens of the Nobel Prize, while a member of staff at IAKH teaches seven seminar sessions that explore aspects of the course topic in further depth and prepare the students for writing their term paper. The teacher of the seminar part also has full responsibility for guiding the students to develop their term paper topics. To enable him or her to do so, teaching hours have been shifted from the lecture to the seminar part of the course. In the present instalment, we have also reduced the page count of the reading for the lectures from over 2,000 pages to some 750 pages, with the understanding that students will have to find and engage with literature outside the “pensum” for their course paper. The reduction also gives the teacher of the seminar part room to introduce further texts to the pensum that are necessary

for the seminar sessions. This change addresses students' complaints about the reading load and brings the curriculum in line with comparable courses, where the maximum "pensum" is set at 1,000 pages.

The present arrangement retains the connection with the Nobel Institute and its director, which is a tremendous asset to the programme, while guaranteeing students close guidance and practical help with their term papers. It balances lectures and active learning components more equally, and it enables the seminar teacher to have a stronger hand in shaping the part of the course where students are led to engage with the history of the Peace Prize in independent ways.

The assignment (term paper) helps students reaching the learning outcome of being able to conduct independent historical research on a relevant topic within the course's scope. The assignment has been introduced in 2021 to replace the take-home exam, not least because of students' negative feedback for the course. The change to a term paper on a self-selected topic, where students engage with a body of secondary sources they research themselves, also prepares them for the master thesis that we want them to concern themselves with early on. Doing independent research requires practice. Presently, the exam in MITRA4421 provides students with the only opportunity during the first semester to do so by writing a term paper.

To make the web information correspond with the assignment and the overall shift to active learning, I propose to update the course page. At the moment, most of the learning outcomes pertain the command of factual knowledge, while nothing is said about the research skills that are being trained.

MITRA4020 – Research and Writing Training I

<https://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/iakh/MITRA4020/>

This course is taught in three meetings in class and two excursions to archives, currently Riksarkivet (National Archives) and Arbeiderbevegelsens Arkiv (ArbArk), which holds material on the labour movement as well as social movements. Students are introduced to the practice of bibliographical research and locating primary sources. The assignment consists of a description of a mock project, written in groups of three (or a tandem of two) students. A sample project description is made available to students on Canvas. In previous semesters, drafts were circulated and prepared for discussion in a peer-review session.

The format has proven to be useful to prepare students for developing their master thesis projects in the second semester. However, students, some of whom not having a bachelor degree in history, have voiced that they miss a more general introduction to history and historiography during the first semester. In previous years, such issues were addressed in MITRA4010, in the second semester. But as they are essential for students already in the first semester, where they write their first term paper and are expected to develop a mock project, it seemed advisable to move that content from 4010 to the first semester and include it in MITRA4020. Given the fact that historians commonly solve issues of theory and method through constant hermeneutic adjustment rather than “applying” theories and methods as given “tools” like one uses a spanner to tighten a screw, the research and writing training course seem a good place to reflect on them.

In the present term, I have begun the course with a sort of “crash course” in history, where I used some of the content from the second semester to MITRA4020. I thought that was useful, but I also saw that it required time that had in previous semesters been used for a “peer review” meeting where we discussed drafts of the project descriptions. To make sure that the groups are on a good way, I have scheduled another “clinic” session where students had an opportunity to get feedback to their ongoing work on the project descriptions. This added two teaching hours to the three times three hours allocated at the beginning of the term, plus the time for two archival trips.

Archival visits are an essential part of this course, though in the past, student groups received a more general introduction to the archives. In the present semester, I tried to get something which was more tailored to their interest and thus more realistic in view to the research experience, so that students did not enter the archive without any expectation. As soon as one of the groups had a case study in mind for their mock project, I had a little search myself and contacted archivists with a more specific request, asking them kindly to prepare their presentation around it. That requires more flexibility on all sides, and we will have to see what the outcome of this approach is going to be. Another possible way to make the archival visit a bit more concrete would be to focus it on a project that the teacher of the module him- or herself is working on.

Second Semester

MITRA4010 – Methods and Theory in Modern International and Transnational History

<https://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/iakh/MITRA4010/>

This course “offers students an introduction to key approaches and concepts relevant for the writing of international and transnational history”. It is organised in twelve weekly meetings, taught by four lecturers in the last instalment in spring 2022. Individual sessions encompass a block on basic theory of history (mentioned above in the discussion of MITRA4020), seminars on concepts like transnational or entangled history, and meetings that reflect the role of concepts in historical writing on particular topics such as the history of capitalism or European integration. The course is assessed in an oral exam (graded) and has a book presentation as an obligatory assignment. According to the course page, MITRA4010 is integrated with the reading course 4011.

Students state in their feedback that 4010 is a challenging course for them. In terms of content, they struggle to understand the role of theory and method in history and find that historiographical basics should be introduced earlier, in the first semester. There are organisational issues, too. As the teaching is distributed across four teachers, many students do not know whom to turn to with questions regarding the assignments. The book presentation is experienced by students and teachers alike as too long an event, while being too short on feedback. Oral exams, which are organised as conversations between individual students and two lecturers about conceptual issues of prospective master thesis projects, often develop into quite productive discussions, but they are difficult to grade and offer little opportunity to give feedback on the actual exam performance.

Most of the students’ frustrations are mirrored in the feedback from staff. Sharing the teaching load causes additional co-ordination work and delays responses to students, as requests have to be forwarded to the person in charge. Furthermore, it is difficult for staff to get acquainted with students and understand group dynamics when they only teach two to four classes and never get to learn all the students’ names. Staff question the usefulness of grading an oral exam, and while they find it productive that students get to read whole monographs, the book presentation does take up a lot of time while offering much less for thorough engagement and feedback.

To address these problems, I would suggest cutting the module in half and let one lecturer each teach one of the resulting two short courses à six sessions (2x5 ECTS-points). These could be taught consecutively in the first and the second half of the semester. Giving sole responsibility to one lecturer would ameliorate the problems with unclear responsibility, delayed

communication, and extra co-ordination work raised by students and staff. Going for a format of two “short courses” rather than one longer one would retain one of MITRA’s major benefits, which is that students encounter a relatively large number of staff and are thus exposed to many different topics and approaches.

When shifting the general introduction to history and historiography to the first semester (as part of MITRA4020) and shedding the topical explorations in the history of capitalism and European integration, the first short course could focus more clearly on “key approaches and concepts relevant for the writing of international and transnational history”, as the course page announces. (Actually, the course page currently lists “diplomatic history”, “international relations”, and “international culture of memory”, which do not feature in the schedule. Conversely, sessions on “entangled history” and “postcolonial history” are taught, but not mentioned on the course page. This lack of correspondence can be avoided by being less specific about content – while very clear about skills and rationale – on the course page.)

This first short course on “Key Concepts and Approaches in Modern International and Transnational History” (not: “methods and theory”!) could be assessed in an oral exam that is either a “pass” or a “fail”. This retains the core of the exercise, which is the student’s reflection on conceptual issues in relation to their empirical research project, while avoiding the problems that come with judging the performance of what has frequently turned into a feedback meeting.

The second short course that would result from a split of MITRA4010 could be taught in a similar way to a reading course: designed and taught by one lecturer and focused on a more tightly defined topic in modern international and transnational history. I will go into further detail in the next part, when discussing MITRA4300.

Reading a historical monograph for a critical presentation is, in itself, a very useful exercise and should be kept. Understanding how monographic studies are built up seems avoids the issue that students turn to previous master theses for orientation and copy other students’ mistakes in due course. The idea is that students know how to organise a monographic study so that they produce a monograph *en miniature* themselves with their master thesis. However, there are problems with the group presentation event. These could be addressed by changing the oral presentation with a written book review of 1-1,200 words. This genre is easier to emulate for students and more conducive to specific feedback. Having to write a review would also have the additional benefit that students will be able to read the monographs with greater yield. Furthermore, particularly good reviews could also get published (in the student-led

journal *Fortid*, for instance), which may give students an extra motivation to do well in this assignment. One could also think of this as a group exercise, where three or four students take a monograph each and produce a review article collectively. As a matter of fact, both individual reviews and review articles could be offered to students as options.

MITRA4300 – Global Encounters 1850-2010: Transnational Movements of People, Ideas and Commodities

<https://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/iakh/MITRA4300/>

This course zooms in on particular instances of people, commodities, and ideas crossing borders throughout the period to “apply the knowledge acquired and the methodological framework of transnational history to concrete examples”. It is taught over twelve weeks in the form of seminars, in spring 2022 led by four lecturers, who each draw on their own research and on up-to-date historical literature. The course is assessed in the form of a paper of 5-6,000 words on a topic in international and transnational history, defined and developed by students independently and with feedback from both peers and the course organiser. To qualify for the exam, students submit a description of their paper project that specifies the question, the research literature, the case study, and the primary sources (if applicable) they plan to engage with.

Students and staff gave similar feedback to this course than to MITRA4010, chief among a lack of clarity and communication and extra co-ordination work. To remedy those issues, I propose a similar split of the 10-ECTS-point module into two halves à six meetings, each focused on a relevant topic in international and transnational history, each taught by one lecturer who is fully in charge.

Dividing both 4010 and 4300 in half would result in four short courses, the first of which would be dedicated to “key concepts and approaches”, while the others could be distinguished from another by focusing on topics in “politics”, “economy”, and “culture and society” respectively. This well-established distinction (which also features in the general description of the programme) does not prevent the courses to be filled with content that transgresses these boundaries, of course, but it is nevertheless a meaningful distinction to give room for short courses on topics from international relations and global governance over capitalism, labour, and migration to food and tourism, taught by IAKH staff who could take those short courses in

turn. Changing two internally fragmented 10-ECTS-modules to four enclosed 5-ECTS-short courses retains the benefit that students meet many lecturers in the second semester, introducing them to a great variety of topics and approaches. However, it avoids the downside of complicated co-ordination, roundabout communication, and fragmentation within modules.

While a “key concepts and approaches” course could, as suggested above, be examined in an oral exam, students could be required to submit a) one book review, b) one publication directed at a general public (a newspaper or magazine article or a podcast), and c) one term paper of 5-6,000 words in either one of the remaining three courses, leaving it to the students to decide where they want to submit which assignment. For instance, a student could write the course paper in the “economy” course, a dissemination piece in “society and culture”, and review the monograph in the “politics” module. The dissemination piece is, at present, not part of the assignments anywhere in the programme. However, it would aim at the “general competence” goal on the MITRA programme’s homepage that states that students are “prepared to (...) render informed contributions to relevant debates both within academic environments and vis-à-vis the general public”.

MITRA4011 – Reading Course II: Methods and Theory in Modern International and Transnational History

<https://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/iakh/MITRA4011/>

This reading course focuses “on one or several of the more specific methodological and theoretical problems connected to the study of international and transnational history (Eurocentrism; entanglement, cultural hybridity etc.)” and provides students with the opportunity of “in-depth reading of secondary literature and reflection on these issues.” It is taught in six meetings by one lecturer. Students are examined by two reflection papers that bring the two to four texts to be read for a session into a conversation and formulate a position to this debate.

By the second semester, the assignment can be expected to be familiar to students. As the format facilitates fruitful discussions, it is conducive to reaching the learning outcomes. Student feedback has been very positive to this reading course, as it is to the reading course in the first semester. This is testimony to great teaching of the individual lecturers (in this case Toufoul Abou-Hodeib) but also hints at benefits of the format. Bearing students’ critique of

unclear communication in other courses in mind, their preference for the reading courses may also have to do with the fact that these courses are taught continuously by one lecturer who is also solely responsible for assignments and exams. Students know what to do and who to turn to, and lecturers fully “own” the course.

As in the case of MITRA4001 though, I question the usefulness of stating the integration of MITRA4011 with MITRA4010. This claim may nurture expectations of a level of coordination that are likely to be disappointed.

In view to some students’ confusion about the role of methods and theory in history, which is grounded in the idea that historians have a kind of “toolbox” at their disposal to study the past, I would reconsider the title of this module. The examples mentioned on the course page – “Eurocentrism”, “entanglement”, “cultural hybridity” – look more like interpretative concepts than “theories” and are certainly not methods. Like with MITRA4010, using the terms “concepts” and “approaches” may better describe the contents of this course than the title “methods and theory”.

MITRA4030 – Research and Writing in History II

<https://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/iakh/MITRA4030/>

This course serves students to develop a viable research project for their master thesis. It consists of one introductory session where the assignment is explained (a project description of about ten standard pages, the bibliography excluded) and three to four meetings later in the semester where students circulate draft project descriptions for peer-reviewing in class. A template for a project description is made available to students via Canvas.

The course builds logically on MITRA4020 (taught in the first semester), where students worked on a description for a mock project in small groups. The progression from 4020 to 4030 is thus easily apparent. The course format corresponds with the learning outcomes formulated on the course page. The course is an important step on the way to the master thesis. Students receive the lecturer’s feedback while also learning from commenting each other’s work. The work on the project description helps students to look for and contact a potential supervisor, who should signal his or her agreement to help a student in the course of the second semester. The project description is also an important document for supervisors, as it helps to monitor the progress of the project and allows for specific feedback.

In some years, the course has not been as well attended and students have not been as involved as we would have liked. So far, attendance and commitment seemed to have depended to a large degree on group loyalty. To provide further incentives to engage students in this course, it may be a good idea to make supervisors in MITRA aware of the importance of this project description seminar, so that they also strongly recommend their students to use it as a forum to develop their research. However, these concerns do not pertain the structure of MITRA4030, which does not seem in need of fundamental change.

Third Semester (Field Term)

For the third semester, students choose between an internship (MITRA4400) and a History Project (MITRA4450). In the past, a majority of 51 MITRA students have opted for an internship.

MITRA4400 – Internship for Modern International and Transnational History Students

<https://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/iakh/MITRA4400/index.html>

The internship gives students an opportunity to get relevant work experience, use analytical skills outside of academia, and gain profile in an international work environment. The agreement signed between the University, the outgoing student, and the organisation that takes on the intern stipulates that 12 to 18 hours of the working week are reserved for the student to write what was until the autumn 2022 defined as a “term paper/report”. The topic of this assignment was to be defined in mutual consultation between the student, the host institution, and a supervisor at the department.

By now, MITRA has established several contacts with relevant institutions in Norway and abroad, including PRIO, the Nobel Institute, the Norwegian Institute in Rome, and C-Rex (for a full list see Appendix 2). The Faculty of Humanities also channels applications to Norwegian embassies, where several MITRA students have interned. The staff at IAKH supports MITRA students with letters of recommendation, and we ask MITRA alumni to talk about their experience and share tips with outgoing students at an information meeting in the second semester. However, there is no guarantee for placements, which should be communicated clearly and early on. Last time, we organised an information meeting with three former MITRA

students who had been at the Nobel Institute, PRIO in Cyprus, and the Institute in Rome on 3 February, though students would have liked this to happen earlier in the semester.

The twenty-page paper that students are required to write during their internship develop very differently, depending on the requirements of the institution where interns are working. One student raised the concern that MITRA students were disadvantaged when applying to competitive internship places at Norwegian embassies because of their obligation to “work on a paper for UiO”. Moreover, the textual genre has only been vaguely defined as “term paper/report”. In turn, students had to straddle the line between the ideas of their hosts and the academic requirements of their IAKH supervisor, which could result in them landing between the chairs.

To avoid these problems and accommodate often very different internship situations, the requirements for the internship from autumn 2022 distinguish between a “commissioned report” and a “term paper”, each at between 15 and 20 standard pages length, as two options that students can choose from. The task for a “commissioned report” is negotiated between the student and the host institution. It has to be greenlighted by the MITRA Program Director to assure that the task is viable and of the kind that requires the student’s analytical skills. While a “commissioned report” is written in view to the host institution’s agenda, a “term paper” has to engage in historical research and is written in accordance with the academic conventions of our discipline. In contrast to the “commissioned report”, it is supervised by a member of staff at IAKH. Students send a first idea for their paper to the Program Director who assigns a supervisor to the project, in case students have not already made arrangements themselves. The topic for the term paper can be freely chose by the student. It has to be relevant in the field of modern international and transnational history and clearly different from the master thesis topic, i.e. engaged with a different body of scholarly literature, based on different primary sources, and focused on a different empirical case.

Drawing a clear distinction between “commissioned report” and “term papers” required us to change the evaluation from marks to “pass” or “fail”, because academic staff members at IAKH may not be able to assess commissioned research fairly and IAKH cannot hand over its authority of assessment to host institutions. When enquiring about this issue at the faculty, it turned out that “pass/fail” assessments are, in fact, the norm for practice semesters like MITRA’s field term. We do intend on providing students with valuable feedback to their work though, regardless of whether they have worked on a “commissioned report” or a “term paper”.

In the former case, we ask host institutions to write a short assessment of the student's work (which may also serve the student in future job applications), and in the latter, we ask assessors to provide a written comment that appreciates strengths and points out weaknesses to help students improve.

MITRA4450 – History Project for Modern International and Transnational History Students

<https://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/iakh/MITRA4450/>

Until autumn 2022, the History Project had entailed a paper of about thirty standard pages on a topic that the student and his or her supervisor have agreed on by mid-September. Five of the thirty pages were supposed to document the “actual research process” and were to be written as a “prologue”. Norwegian students of MITRA had to use archives outside of Norway, whereas international students were “allowed” to focus on Norway and utilise sources in Norwegian archives. Another restriction required the History Project to be clearly distinct from the master thesis project, as an overlap in the historiography and/or sources would give students who choose the History Project option more time to perfect their master thesis than their peers who are on an internship.

The History Project was chosen by a minority of MITRA students (36, compared to 51 interns). Those who have completed the assignment have found it a useful exercise on the way to the master thesis. This is confirmed by the fact that some of the graduates with the best results in their thesis had taken the History Project during their field term. However, the assignment is not without problems.

Above all, quite a lot of work goes into this project without it being accounted for. Students who opt for the History Project leave the programme with a 30-point master thesis, but without the internship on their CVs. And whereas a master thesis contributes to research, an article-length History Project paper simply disappears like any other term paper. Among some students, the History Project has, unfairly in the view of staff, the reputation of being “Plan B” for those who have not managed to land an internship. Moreover, the textual genre of the five-page documentation/prologue is unclear. How should it be weighted in relation to the rest of the paper? Finally, the restriction for students of different nationalities to work with archives in certain territories seems arbitrary and difficult to legitimise in a case where a student has a

great idea for a study of transnational history that happened to have occurred on the doorstep. The choice of archive needs to follow from the research question, not restricting it.

A last problem with the History Project has been that some students did not make use of supervision, while not all supervisors were sure what the project entailed and what was demanded of them. This communication problem has been addressed in the autumn semester 2022 by, firstly, centralising the application for a History Project with the Program Director and the study administration. Students had to apply for a first project idea to the study administration, and the student advisor discussed with the Program Director about who would be the most competent supervisor for that project. After that, student and supervisor were brought into contact. Secondly, supervisors' questions about the task were effectively answered through a redefinition of the History Project as a research article of 8,000 words, without a "prologue" or a separate documentation of the archival research.

Describing the assignment as a research article, written to be published in a historical journal from *Fortid* upward, is also meant to correct the aforementioned "under-valuation" of the History Project. Such an academic publication could be an asset when students apply for PhD- or research positions, as a fifth of the first three graduate cohorts have done successfully. It would raise the profile of the History Project as a kind of "academic track" within MITRA, without undermining the value of the 30-ECTS-point thesis.

Defining the History Project as a research article clarifies for students questions of genre and does away with some arbitrary restrictions. The "prologue" is dropped, and the choice of archive(s) follows from the paper's research question. The distinction between the History Project and the thesis topic, which had occasionally been an issue, can now be enforced with a reference to the convention that forbids self-plagiarism.

MITRA4040 – Research and Writing Training in History III

<https://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/iakh/MITRA4040/index.html>

This module is meant to help students to systematically continue their work on the thesis project during the field term. The course asks them to develop their bibliography (which they have begun to compile as part of the project description in MITRA4030) further to, at least, an annotated bibliography or, if possible, a bibliographic essay. This assignment is to be written in view to the overview of the research debate which will be part of the introduction to the

eventual thesis. The course encompasses an introductory meeting at the start of the third semester, where the assignment is explained with the help of example texts and a discussion about systematic reading and note-taking. Students are asked to form groups of four and give each other feedback on their maturing research overviews two to three weeks before final versions are due.

As internships or History Projects can easily absorb students, their reading for the master thesis commonly slows down considerably. However, the bibliography assignment still seems a useful and viable means to bridge the period between the moment students have designed their thesis project (MITRA4030) and the start of the fourth semester, when they fully concentrate on their thesis. At the very least, the assignment allows thesis supervisors to monitor the students' reading progress and understanding of the literature at the moment they focus fully on their thesis project. The usefulness of the annotated bibliography for the thesis is obvious; the format allows students to proceed at their own pace.

Fourth Semester

MITRA4095 – Master's Thesis in Modern International and Transnational History

<https://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/iakh/MITRA4095/>

During this semester, students concentrate fully on completing their thesis. All students are supervised individually; some organise their own peer-review groups, still others participate in group supervision that some supervisors organise *ad hoc*, on a per-semester basis and depending on availability, candidates, and thesis topics. Good to excellent results as well as the relatively high rate of completion strongly suggest that these loose arrangements work for the most part. However, that does not mean that they cannot be improved.

Most importantly, the programme needs to make sure that students have already developed feasible projects, oriented themselves in the research literature, and have identified primary sources so that they can hit the ground running at the start of the fourth semester. The importance of timing needs to be repeatedly stressed during the programme, beginning at the start of the first semester. Potential topics and supervisors should be contacted during the first two semesters, and students should not expect of getting a supervisor assigned. Though most students have sought advisers directly, as recommended, there have been a few cases where the expectation to “receive” a supervisor has delayed a student's start with the thesis work.

At other departments, the assignment of students to supervisors is formalised, for example by a committee that sifts through project plans to decide which member of staff would be the optimal supervisor. Formalising the process in this way will require considerable co-ordination work for staff, while it puts another administrative layer between them and students who may be discouraged to seek direct contact. The present arrangement may appear somewhat messy, but it requires students to show initiative and take ownership of their projects. The study programme purposefully introduces them to many potential supervisors so that there is no lack of staff to discuss project ideas with. With few exceptions, this went well in the previous semesters. What is more, each student cohort has distributed their members rather well among the staff that teach in the MITRA programme, resulting in a considerable diversity of thesis topics. (For a complete list of dissertation titles see Appendix 3.) By the way, this diversity may be read as further proof of the fact that the programme has trained its students in independent research.

The coherence of the MITRA programme

The MITRA programme structure progresses from “key issues” in the first semester over “methods and theory” courses in the second term to the master thesis in the fourth semester, with the “field term” (internship or History Project) placed in the third semester. The two first semesters include one “big” 10-ECTS-point topical course each (War, Peace and the Nobel Peace Prize in the first, Global Encounters in the second semester). The main “stem” of teaching is flanked by three practical modules that build upon another and lead up to the thesis project.

4. semester	<u>MITRA4095 – Master's thesis in Modern International and Transnational History</u>			
3. semester	<u>MITRA4400 – Field Term - Internship for Modern International and Transnational History Students or MITRA4450 – Field Term - History Project for Modern International and Transnational History Students</u>			<u>MITRA4040 – Research and Writing Training in History III</u>
2. semester	<u>MITRA4010 – Methods and Theory in Modern International and Transnational History</u>	<u>MITRA4300 – Global Encounters 1850 - 2010 - Transnational Movements of People, Ideas and Commodities</u>	<u>MITRA4011 – Reading course II - Methods and Theory In Modern International and Transnational History</u>	<u>MITRA4030 – Research and Writing Training in History II</u>
1. semester	<u>MITRA4000 – Key Issues in Modern International and Transnational History</u>	<u>MITRA4421 – War, Peace and the Nobel Peace Prize</u>	<u>MITRA4001 – Reading course I - Key Issues in Modern International and Transnational History</u>	<u>MITRA4020 – Research and Writing Training in History I</u>
	10 ECTS	10 ECTS	5 ECTS	5 ECTS

On paper, the structure promises a lot of integration and logical progression that in practice is difficult to deliver. This is partly because courses that run parallel are almost impossible to coordinate (4001 with 4000, 4011 with 4010), partly because team-taught courses have to some extent become fragmented, as mentioned above. Another explanation why the programme's "tidiness" may not be deliverable across semesters and classrooms has to do with the nature of history as a practice in which historical facts cannot easily be separated from historians' interpretations and where "methods and theory" do not work as discrete tools. Consequently, it causes confusion to announce that they are introduced separately, one after the other, rather

than history being presented from the start as an amalgamation of facts, debates, concepts, and approaches. From our interviews we got the strong impression that students come to expect neat packages and that they are duly disappointed once they find out that the content does not come compartmentalised, particularly theories and methods.

A progression that is more conducive to introducing students to history acknowledges that historians learn their discipline through practice.⁹ It would concentrate on assignments and make sure that both their level of complexity increases and that they lead up to the thesis as the biggest challenge. With extracts, reflection papers, an oral exam, project descriptions, at least one independently researched term paper per term, and, as suggested and implemented from spring 2023, amended with a book review and a dissemination piece (newspaper article or podcast), the current programme offers students varied opportunities to develop their skills. At the same time, more than one term paper gives students a chance to fail, learn from mistakes, and improve on the next paper. Focusing the progression more explicitly on assignments would not only represent what is already happening in modules but would also free the programme structure from announcing integration that is not implemented and easily raises wrong expectations among students.

Seeing the progression of assignments as a red thread also allows for modules to be diverse and varied in their topics and less restricted by integration on paper. Students rather than content need to progress. They will do so as they get inspiration and guidance to complete assignments at an increasing level of complexity.

At the same time, assignments need to be clear in their genre and their purpose. Recent adjustments to the programme, including an overhaul of semester pages, have focused on this issue and tried to clarify exam tasks. Wherever possible, students were provided with sample texts that illustrated to them what an extract, reflection paper, or project description should look like.

Student-active learning is another major element of the whole programme. To facilitate it, it seems advisable to give individual lecturers full responsibility to design and teach a course, within a framework that assures a certain breadth of topical coverage. Comments from students and staff support the view that seminars benefit from continuity and internal consistency. We take from this feedback that seminars are not simply content deliverables but social settings

⁹ William H. Sewell jr., "Theory, History, and Social Science", in Idem, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), 1-21.

where students and staff alike need time to establish working relations that are conducive to learning.

Teachers are different, they will try to involve students in different ways to the study of history. They meet students who are different as well and who will respond differently to what is being offered to them. To present students with a variety of opportunities where they can forge a path to become historians, MITRA should, in our view, continue introducing them to many lecturers during the first two semesters. Judging from the quality and diversity of the academic work that students have produced over the years, it seems safe to say that the variety of lecturers and topics is one of the strengths of MITRA. The creation of four short courses à six meetings upholds this principle, while also allowing for the seminars (Latin for “seedbed”) to fulfil their function. Labelling them “key concepts and approaches”, “politics”, “economy”, and “culture and society” suggests a breadth that the staff at IAKH is able to represent.

If implemented, a slightly revised programme structure would look like this (changes are marked green):

4.	50-page thesis (bibliography excluded)	MITRA4095 – Master Thesis			
3	a) “commissioned report” (15-20 pages), OR “term paper” (15-20 pages), OR research article (8,000 words) b) Annotated bibliography/bibliographic essay	MITRA4400 – Internship, or MITRA4450 – History Project			MITRA4040 – Research and Writing Training III
2	a) Oral exam (pass/fail) b) Book review (1-1,200 words) c) Newspaper article or podcast d) Term paper (5-6,000 words) e) Reflection papers f) Project description	Concepts and Approaches in MITRA	Economy in MITRA	MITRA4011 – Reading Course II	MITRA4030 – Research and Writing Training II
		Politics in MITRA	Culture and Society in MITRA		

1	a) Three-day take-home paper (8-10 pages) b) Term paper (5-6,000 words) c) Extract and reflection paper d) Project description of mock project	MITRA4000 – Key Issues in Modern International and Transnational History	MITRA4421 – War, Peace, and the Nobel Peace Prize (lectures and seminars)	MITRA4001 – Reading Course I	MITRA4020 – Research and Writing Training I
Semester	Assignments	10 ECTS	10 ECTS	5 ECTS	5 ECTS

Some of the assignments have already been redefined, as mentioned, though the creation of short courses in the second semester is a topic that needs discussion. An outside view on these plans as well as the current state of the programme will help us define it for the coming years.

Attachments

Appendix 1: “Tabell gjennomstrømningstall”, retrieved from Tableau ultimo 2022.

Appendix 2: List of host institutions for MITRA internships

Appendix 3: List of titles of submitted master theses in MITRA since 2019