



QUALITY ASSESSMENT BY EU PARTNERS (PARTNER P2: UNIVERSITY OF SALZBURG)

Revised course 2: “Man & Tropical Forest Ecosystem Function”

QUALITY ASSESSMENT
<p>Quality criteria 1: Number of credit units for lectures, practical sessions and self-learning are appropriate to the contents</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <p><i>Evaluation</i></p> <p>The largest part of the credit units of the course is attributes to lectures, whereas the number of units for practical sessions and self-learning appears to remain residual. This is a reasonable approach for theoretical introductory courses like the one assessed here, the contents taught in which are worked from a practical perspective in other courses, as it is assumed to be the case. This (i.e. whether the topic is addressed or not from a practical perspective in other courses) remains, however, unclear through the descriptions provided in the syllabus and should be cleared up in order to be able to provide a more accurate assessment. If no additional practice-oriented courses on the topic are offered during the master’s degree, the share of credit units for lectures, practical sessions and self-learning would be considered inappropriate and clear efforts should be undertaken in order to substantially increase the number of units allocated to practical sessions and self-learning (see suggestions for improvement below). Improvements in this direction are, indeed, advisable, even if practical courses on the topic do exist. The provision of practical skills is of high importance in order to train professionals not only knowledgeable of the theoretical concepts/approaches available, but, most importantly, able to use these concepts/approaches for the resolution of real problems/situations in practice and work with different tools and in various environments.</p> <p><i>Strategies for improvement</i></p> <p>As with other courses, the suggested strategies for improvement are twofold and imply increases in: 1) practice-oriented elements; and 2) dynamism and the self-learning components of the course. First of all, it becomes very advisable to convert some parts of some lectures into practical sessions. Potential parts to be converted are, for example, those related to: 1) rural ecosystem rehabilitation, 2) people’s perception of environment, and 3) nutrient conservation strategies, among others. Practical sessions should be conceived as real case studies, when possible. Local professionals might be more or less actively involved in some of them. This might give rise to very enriching discussions and open up a more precise practical perspective among students, given the knowledge that local professionals have about the strategies, etc. being followed in the country/region/locality and the opportunities and hurdles that appear in practice.</p> <p>Second, the use of in-class discussions, quizzes, games, etc. during the sessions would be very advisable, as a tool to provide dynamism to the course and make its contents more attractive to students. In-class discussions, in particular, can be a very good tool to give students a chance to express themselves and better integrate their already existent knowledge on the topic with the new contents taught. Short readings and quizzes after each of the lectures might also be furnished. This would offer students the opportunity to continuously self-evaluate the level of comprehension that they have gained of the different concepts/approaches worked and let them easily identify in which areas they should put more efforts (as they have not clearly understood the corresponding contents). It should be mentioned that it seems that some of these methods are already used in the course. Sentences like “the course will make most of interactive and self-reflective methods of teaching and learning” or the inclusion of quizzes as one of the evaluation methods seem to indicate this. However, the extent and purpose for which these methods are used remain dubious and should be further clarified in the syllabus. This would enable to provide better targeted suggestions for improvement.</p> <p>All these amendments should involve the formulation of more practical assignments. According to the syllabus, almost no assignment is planned for this course or they are not considered in the evaluation of students. We propose the creation of small practical assignments (one for each of the subject areas covered in the course) and a “final practical project” that builds on all previous practical assignments. Both individual assignments and group assignments should be offered to the students.</p>

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<p>Quality criteria 2: Total number of credit units in the course is correct and appropriate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Evaluation</i> The total number of credits awarded is too high if a workload of 30 hours is estimated. <i>Strategies for improvement</i> Since 1 ECTS equate to circa 28 hours, there is a need to either decrease the number of ECTS awarded to 1 or increase the workload for students to approximately 60 hours. We would especially recommend increasing the workload for students, if possible. The reason for that is the persisting need for increases in ECTS units devoted to practice-oriented activities, so as to ensuring an appropriate ratio among lectures, practical sessions and self-learning components.
<p>Quality criteria 3: Positioning of the courses in Curricula is appropriate based on the progressive level of difficulty</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Evaluation</i> The positioning of the course in the first semester of the curricula (M.Phil. studies in Environmental Sciences) does not appear to be optimal. The introductory character of the course to ecosystem processes in forests and human interactions with these ecosystems asks for its positioning in one of the first semesters of the master's programme. However, general knowledge on ecosystems and ecosystem processes should be gained by students in previous courses before attending the course, the reason why the first semester seems not to be the most optimal option for this course. <i>Strategies for improvement</i> We would suggest scheduling this course in the second semester of the master's degree. By then, students will have already acquired basic knowledge about ecosystems, required to easily follow the contents of the course. This would be thanks to the courses scheduled in the first semester, such as the course "Ecosystem Processes", revised under the frame of the SUNRAISE project. Moreover, its positioning in the second semester would make it possible that the course constitutes the basis for other more specialised courses offered in the third and fourth semesters.
<p>Quality criteria 4: Tests are suitable and appropriate to support transferable skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Evaluation</i> Mostly only exams are used for the derivation of the grade that students get. Eighty percent of the grade is obtained through the evaluation of the quality of the answers provided to a mid-term and a final written examination. Using this approach is reasonable in a theoretical introductory course, as it is the case here. However, it does not result appropriate to support transferable skills. Thus, it should only be utilised if practical courses do exist in the master's programme dealing with the topic of the course and using a completely different evaluation system (more practice-oriented). If this was not the case, the selected evaluation system should be rethought (see the suggested strategies for improvement below). The level of understanding of theoretical concepts and approaches can be evaluated by using exams, but it becomes an unsuitable method for the evaluation of the capability of students to use the learnt concepts/approaches for the resolution of real problems/situations in practice. <i>Strategies for improvement</i> You can find strategies for improvement under "quality criteria 1". They concern the provision of practical assignments. Most part of the grade should be inferred through the evaluation of the quality of practical assignments, whereas exams should only be used for the derivation of a small portion of it or not used at all. Practical assignments should comprise both individuals work and group work and involve short written tasks, oral presentations, surveys/interviews, field work, short mathematical exercises, etc. They should be conceived as case studies. For example, students might have to survey the perception of the environment of residents/professionals and compare the results obtained with those shown in selected scientific papers. Another possible practical assignment might be: students need to suggest strategies for rural ecosystem rehabilitation in a particular locality; among many other possibilities. The assignment that you suggest in the syllabus might also be included, the objective, positioning, etc. of which remain unclear and should be further cleared up in the syllabus. The active participation in in-class discussions, quizzes, games, etc. should also be taken into consideration when calculating the grade that students get. Of high relevant is also the location of all evaluation activities in the timeline. Practical assignments and self-learning components should be positioned right after the corresponding theoretical session. It is argued that this would enable substantial improvements in skills transferability. Students' memory is limited and, as such, students will be

able to better interrelate the theoretical concepts/approaches learnt with their practical implementation, if such an approach is followed.

Quality criteria 5: TLM and assessment strategy support students in undertaking the course i.e. prerequisites are helpful and relevant, assessments helps gauge students understanding etc.

• *Evaluation*

Prerequisites have not been defined for attending this course. The introductory character of the course to the topic of forest ecosystems together with its initial positioning in the first semester of the master's programme seem to explain this fact. Nevertheless, the apparent need to have previous knowledge in ecosystems before attending the course asks for the definition of prerequisite courses offering some basic insights in the area. This is especially required if the course is finally positioned in the second semester of the master's programme, as we suggest. In this case, not only the prerequisites to take part in the master apply, but specific prerequisites for attendance for the course should also be set up. Regarding the lecture materials, no precise assessment can be made from our side, because we do not have access to them.

• *Strategies for improvement*

Prerequisite courses should encompass any course taught during the first semester of the M.Phil. studies in Environmental Sciences addressing the area of ecosystem processes, functions, etc. This should comprise the course "Ecosystem Processes", revised under the frame of the SUNRAISE project. This would avert having to address basic concepts (at least not in an extensive way) that are actually addressed in other more introductory courses. An example of that is the concept of "ecosystem", which is planned to be introduced in this course, but also e.g. in the course "Ecosystem Processes".

The fact that we do not have access to the e-learning materials makes it harder to render specific strategies for improvement. It may be the case that some of our suggestions have, actually, already been put in practice. First of all, we would strongly recommend giving access to students to the slides and videos of the theoretical sessions on the e-learning platform. Students should be able to take a look at these materials anytime, so as to revisiting the concepts and approaches worked as many times as necessary. This can be particularly useful for the revision of concepts/parts of the lectures not clearly understood at first glance, as well as to support self-working at home. Second, the creation of an online chat would be really advisable. This would constitute an opportunity to foster a more fluent communication among students and between students and the professor, not least when a doubt on a certain topic arises, etc. The provision of a list and some pieces for further reading and some additional practical interactive exercises should also be considered. This would be especially attractive for all those students really interested in the topic and willing to learn more.

Quality criteria 6: Theory/Practice-oriented components are sufficient to cater the learning outcomes and skills development

• *Evaluation*

Theory-oriented components are sufficient to cater the learning outcomes and knowledge development, but this is not the case with practice-oriented components. The practice-oriented components should be further developed in the course planning and evaluation process to value the student work. This is especially required if the course contents are not further worked in other more practice-oriented courses during the master's programme.

• *Strategies for improvement*

The strategies suggested are pointed out under "quality criteria 1 and 4".

Further comments:

You should consider changing the title of the course from "Man & Tropical Forest Ecosystem Function" to e.g. "People & Tropical Forest Ecosystem Function". The term "man" appears inappropriate.

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