



Report from a teaching sabbatical at  
University of California Los Angeles (UCLA)  
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## INTRODUCTION

This report is my reflections as a visiting scholar at UCLA during the fall quarter of 2022 and is a part of my obligations as a STINT Fellow. The report is structured as follows, first I discuss pre-scholarship planning and then I address my role and activities at UCLA. Secondly, some consideration of lessons drawn that I hope can be of interest to my home university or Swedish higher education in general. Hopefully this report will also be of help to future STINT fellow in their planning process, and especially those lucky enough to be placed at UCLA.

UCLA takes great pride in that it has been ranked the best public university in the US for the fifth year in a row. Almost 45 000 students were enrolled at UCLA in 2022. I did my sabbatical at the Luskin School of Public Affairs, at the department of Public Policy. I was fortunate to get an invite to in an academic environment that is similar to my home department, both in term of being interdisciplinary and by focusing on pressing policy areas. It really was a spot-on fit. On their website the school is presented like this:

“Founded in 1994, UCLA Luskin incorporates the best practices in scholarship, research, and teaching in the fields of social work, urban and regional planning, and policymaking. The unique intersection of these disciplines within one school allows for academic cross-collaboration and a rich education that values diverse perspectives at the macro- and micro- organizational levels. Graduates of the bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral programs are well prepared to take leadership roles and effect change as practitioners, researchers and policymakers in the public, private and non-governmental sectors. Faculty of the Luskin School of Public Affairs are actively engaged in research that addresses pressing national and regional issues including immigration, drug policy, prison reform, health care financing, transportation and the environment, national security, economic development, and an aging U.S. and world population.”

A general reflection is that spending time at a foreign university not only result in new ideas of possible improvements for your home university, but also enables one to understand and appreciate many aspects of Swedish higher education. Instead of solely thinking about the visit as an opportunity to learn to do teaching differently, it is also an opportunity to value the high quality of Swedish universities.

### *Preparing for a teaching sabbatical at UCLA*

As concluded by many before me the main lesson learned about preparing for the sabbatical is to not underestimate the time it takes. There are a lot of administrative work involved before the class starts and teaching begins. This entails both preparing all the necessary paperwork before leaving Sweden and the paperwork that needs to be done when arriving at the hosting university. I would recommend all future fellows to contact the host university in early January to understand what type of documentation they need. Since before being able to apply for a visa at the US embassy in Stockholm the host university needs to process and validate the visit.

For me and for the cohort of 2021 it was also a pandemic to deal with. Initially I planned to visit UCLA during the fall quarter of 2021, but since the US embassy in Stockholm shut down their visa services for non-American citizens it was not possible to obtain a visa. I had planned to bring my family and had arranged for my children to go to school in Los Angeles during fall and had everything planned and arranged – including a place for us to stay. But during the summer we realized that we would not be able to go. We had to postpone the sabbatical to the fall quarter of 2022. Even though it did not feel like it at the time it might have been a blessing in disguise since during 2021 and the spring quarter of 2022 all teaching at UCLA was conducted online. The downside of the postponement was that I was not able to bring my family for the whole visit of 2022, instead they joined me in late November.

In early spring of 2021, I was in contact with my academic contact at the Luskin School of Public Affairs, Professor and Chair Martin Gilens. I quickly realized that I was given a lot of freedom in deciding on what course to offer. I took the opportunity to put together a course that I have wanted to give, but never had the opportunity to. Professor Gilens only had a few minor suggestions and comments on my idea to give a comparative course on Public Management Reforms. We decided that the course was appropriate for students at graduate level. I asked for and received three previous syllabi from the department to help me put together a syllabus that included all the expected information and instructions. After this early discussion on the syllabus, I was given the freedom to structure and decide on the full content of the course, including assignments, literature, and office hours. There was no need for any approval from the department. In correspondence I also decided on teaching hours, and was offered to give lectures twice a week, Mondays and Wednesdays, each lecture being one hour and fifteen minutes. Another, for me less attractive, option was to have three hours of teaching once a week.

I went for a short pre-visit to UCLA to meet my contact persons in April of 2022. This was an opportunity to follow up on the discussions we had earlier on Zoom. I think the pre-visit was mainly worthwhile as an opportunity to mentally start preparing for the sabbatical and an opportunity to start planning where to stay during the sabbatical. I had scheduled some meetings with people subletting rooms and having the opportunity to look at these enabled me to make a more informed decision. I do not know to which extent it differs between different universities, but for anyone going to UCLA it is fully up to oneself to find somewhere to stay.

Finding affordable living in Los Angeles is not easy, and for the most part it is a task that the STINT fellow needs to solve on his or her own. Also commuting in Los Angeles is a time-consuming enterprise, so ideally one would opt for living relatively close to the university. It is also hard to find suitable places to stay at an early stage, since many apartments seems to become available during the summer. Life in Los Angeles is costly, and one must make sure that the apartment does not make up for too big a share of the scholarship. This was maybe the biggest challenge, and I would recommend to regularly look at all available renting and accommodation websites and when doing so also make sure of where the apartment is located and how much time is needed for commuting.

I had excellent help from the staff at the host department in getting all the necessary paperwork ready for the visa application to the US embassy in Stockholm. There are several steps in this process, and if one does not start early enough there is a risk that the visa is not issued in due time before leaving Sweden.

### *Teaching and working*

When arriving at UCLA it took me about a week to get settled. I needed to get registered, get an office, getting access to the teaching platform and an email address, applying for a university id-card, and getting acquainted with campus and where the different student and staff resources where located (library, gym, and restaurants). In some ways I think my stay was affected by a few extraordinary circumstances. Firstly, it seemed like the department was in a post-pandemic state since most staff seemed to continue working from home. Which resulted in an absence of collegial interaction. Secondly, the department building was under seismic renovation, and it was quite noisy most days. Which I think was another reason for faculty to prefer working from home. Thirdly, during the last weeks there was daily demonstrations on campus. Students that

worked as teaching assistants or research assistants demonstrated for better conditions. For many courses this resulted in major dropouts among students (although my students showed up for classes). In conclusion, it was a turbulent quarter that to some extent hindered daily and spontaneous interaction with faculty members.

In my class were 28 students, twenty-five graduate students and three undergraduate students. Early on I was asked if I wanted my class to be open for undergraduates. The undergraduates had the same tasks and content as the graduate student, but the grades bar for them was slightly less demanding. One difference in comparison to back home was that the students had the opportunity to join a course and then try it for two weeks, before finally deciding if to join or not. This made planning a bit more difficult, for example when putting student working groups together.

In my class were many international students, from Japan, China, Colombia, Kazakhstan, and Germany. I was informed at the meeting in April that a large portion of students were international students, especially from China and Japan, and I made an effort to include information (articles) about these countries in the course. This was due to that the course included comparing public management reforms in different countries. Since I believe in student participation and that the students should be co-designers, I decided that one day each week was a classical lecture where I presented a theme, and the other day of the week was for a small group of students to prepare and take the lead. Their task was to find illuminating quotes in the literature, and then lead a discussion related to the quotes.

Already at the first lecture I gave them an assignment to work on and that was to be handed in at the end of the course. Their task was to formulate a question related to public management reforms and then compare at least two countries. They had to hand in a mid-term paper that was a draft of their final paper, and this enabled me to give them some feedback and recommendations to work on. The students also had the opportunity to come to my office for supervision.

What was a challenge was not only that it was a diverse group of students, but that they had very different educational backgrounds, both in terms of methods and theoretical knowledge. The assignment also demanded of them that they had some basic research skills. I think that this is a more unusual situation at Swedish universities since most of them have graduated from a program

with a preset number of compulsory courses. The advantage of the American system with a high degree of freedom of choice is that it gives students the opportunity to select courses relevant and interesting to them, but it also makes the student groups more heterogenous. I had one student at the beginning of the course that came up to me to tell me that he found the lecture highly interesting, but he was not sure what I meant when I talked about “the public administration” – since he had been working for the last years in the private sector. This made me understand that I in the classroom had students that had an undergraduate in public policy and who were highly familiar with the public sector and then some other students that were newcomers to the field.

In many ways teaching is teaching, and planning, designing, and implementing a course is quite similar regardless of country or university (at least in a Western context). The main difference was really the amount of trust and freedom granted. In all aspects it was up to me (as the instructor) to decide on all matters regarding the course, without any interference from above. Also, it seemed like most courses were taught by only one instructor, instead of a team of teachers. One would think that it is a risk when a course is solely dependent on one person. As a visiting scholar on a teaching sabbatical, it would have been interesting to teach together with another teacher and to learn more about their views and ideas on teaching and pedagogy.

It seems like the students at UCLA were properly introduced to some ground rules, or codes of conduct. They were all very polite and correct in the classroom and in all communication with me, online or in-person. Most striking was how well written and to the point the mails I received were. I think it made the work more pleasant for everyone, and it is something that I think could be improved at my home university. It is not a matter of being more formal or hierarchical, but instead having a set of ground rules on how to communicate and that these are communicated to everyone at an early stage.

Most students had three other courses running in parallel. This became most apparent when it was time for them to hand in their mid-term papers, since most courses had similar deadlines for hand-in. Since there was no communication between the courses running in parallel it is difficult to assess the students amount of workload. It was however obvious that during some weeks the students were quite stressed.

A positive consequence of teaching at a new university, especially a university that gives you a lot of discretion to design a course is that it gives one the opportunity to try new pedagogical ideas. It was a privilege to be unstrained and able to try out new ways to teach. Luskin School of Public Affairs was a place where I had the opportunity to do this, and to do minor adjustments during the course. Due to feedback from the students, I slightly changed the assignments to better meet their needs and making their term papers more useful for them. At my home university I have over the years thought of the idea of co-creating course content in dialogue with the students, but often felt restrained to do so. I think the experience at Luskin's, and the benefits from trying, makes me more confident to do so back home – within the frames of the syllabus and course plan. I think it can be a fruitful way to involve and engage the students, especially with more experienced students since it will enable them to focus on issues or topics that they deem relevant for their future careers. I am not sure if this endeavor was more a result of me coming in as an outsider, and thereby feeling freer to be flexible, or if it is a common practice.

Many differences between my home university and UCLA can be understood as a difference of resources. UCLA is a huge campus university that have all type of facilities for the students and the opportunities seems almost overwhelming, with training facilities and student support centers. In my view there is a more care-taking approach towards the students, whereas at my home university the students are treated more as self-going adults. Especially when it comes to students that in some ways struggle with their studies. UCLA has developed a support system to help and guide struggling students, and the staff at Luskin's work daily with helping students that fail to succeed in their studies. It is also striking how UCLA has been able to cultivate and foster an UCLA identity among the students. Most students seem to have some sort of UCLA attire and seem to be proud to show the world that they study at UCLA. This also include the different schools or departments that have their own line of clothing. By extension I imagine that this also results in a closer relationship with alumni. At Luskin's the students were offered to be part of trip to Washington DC to meet up with former Luskin alumni to hear how they utilized their education in their professional careers. The bond established with graduated students and having them connecting students to the professional world is something that could be further developed back home. This is something we are doing in a somewhat smaller scale at my home department, but in a more non-systematic way.

What impressed me and that I think is worth bringing back home is the system of having experienced students helping new students (the TA-system). It is of course another example of resources, to be able to employ students to explain, help, and mentor other students. As far as I could tell it seems to be to the benefit of both student groups. I do not think it should replace the responsibility of the faculty instructors, but rather complement and help new students to better understand course literature and lectures. For the experienced students mentoring is a way to repeat and be reminded of previous knowledge, but also train them in explaining and teaching. For the receiving students it is an opportunity to discuss whatever they find difficult and challenging.

I attended several events and seminars at UCLA, and I was overwhelmed with the number of events taking place daily. Students have plenty of possibilities to fill their daily schedule with interesting seminars and activities. This is also something that I was able to take part of, especially activities connected to internationalization. I specifically enjoyed and found of interest the events with invited guest from outside the academic sphere. It was practitioners who shared their professional view on topics of interest to the students (and faculty). In one of them they had invited several representatives from embassies and consulates to talk about their agendas to combat and mitigate current global challenges, and it was an opportunity for students to learn about how issues that they discuss in class are dealt with in practice. I also took part in other interesting events, both events hosted by my department and by the university. One small takeaway was that most of the events included some type of food, usually pizza. I suppose this was a way to encourage wide participation.

My impression was that UCLA is an open university and an “arena” broader than just higher education. There is a strong focus on culture and sports. Another aspect of this openness is the tradition of inviting students’ parents to different sort of events. Apart from being a matter of resources I suppose that these undertakings make more sense at a university with high tuition and also for a campus university with many students spending most of their time on campus. However, I also think that is a way to marketize and building a strong sense of community. I appreciated these efforts to open the university and UCLA:s aim to be an arena for meetings across societal sectors. In a Swedish context I think there is something to be inspired by, and for example many Swedish universities have facilities that are mostly unused during evenings and weekends – and perhaps it could be used for cultural events and civil society activities.



Being part of the international community at UCLA means being part of a big and diverse group of people. I really enjoyed meeting up with other visiting scholars, and international students, at the events organized by the UCLA Dashew Center. This center arranged and offered a full program of social activities and events. This was an opportunity to meet people from different departments and faculties and exchanging reflections about life at UCLA and Los Angeles. I often made me think about the visiting scholars that come to Malmö university, and the lack of meeting places or lack of activities. The life as a visitor can be lonely at times. I found these events to be a relaxed social space and they helped me to find a community with peers. However, it is a bit sad that this international community is an enclave within the university, and there seems to be a lack of interest from the regular staff. I did not encounter any attempts or ambitions to create spaces for interaction between the internationals and the regular staff. Since UCLA is a big internationally recognized university, I think there is a tendency to think that there is little to learn from international visitors and the general attitude seems to be that visitors are there to learn from them – rather than viewing it as a mutual learning opportunity. With that said it was impressive to see the resources put into arranging activities and events for all visiting scholars and students, which I think is something that sometimes are missing at my home university.

I also had the opportunity to get accustomed to having office hours. This is something that seems to be expected by all instructors and that students take for granted. I guess it differs between departments and classes to which extent students make use of these hours. I think it is a good idea, both for teachers and for students. About one third of the students in my class made use of this offer sometime during the quarter, and mostly to get feedback on their assignment. Also, quite a few were interested in discussing their future carriers or asking for letter of recommendation for further studies. In hindsight I think I should have made in obligatory to come and see me at least once during the quarter. I did strongly encourage some students to come and see me after reading their mid-term paper and could see that they were struggling to formulate a relevant topic or finding a feasible strategy to fulfil a systematic analysis. A meeting would probably have been beneficial to every student and would have helped them to better understand my expectations on their final paper. This would ideally be after reading their mid-term paper and would probably been a way to improve the overall quality of their final paper. It was a challenge for me to fully understand the appropriate level for a graduate course.

Initially I thought it was supposed to be a course on advanced level with an emphasis on analytical skills and discussions on how to analytically approach the subject. Just three weeks into the course

I did realize that most students were more interested in the subject in a more practical way. They struggled to approach the subject analytically (generally they seemed relatively unfamiliar with relevant bodies of theory), and many of them did not possess the methodological skills necessary for a (rigorous) comparative analysis. I think the freedom given them to formulate a research question, that was comparative and within the scope of public management reforms, was difficult for some of them. One of the instructions was also that they should explicitly describe their methodological strategy and motivate both their choice of method and their choice of cases. The assignment was similar to a small research project, except that there was no need for them to collect a vast amount of data. I did realize that some struggled to make the necessary choices and to conduct some sort of independent analysis.

One notable difference was the awareness of ethnicity that seems to be of importance at UCLA. Efforts are put into categorizing students in different ethnic categories and keeping track of how they are represented at different levels of education. I am not sure what to make of it, but it was strange to me to see this emphasis on placing students in a scheme of around ten different ethnicities (and mixes thereof).

### *Learnings and lessons*

It was a tremendous experience to get the opportunity to be able to spend an extended period at UCLA. In some ways I feel it had an impact on me that I am somewhat unaware about. That there are lessons learned that goes beyond the craft of teaching and are lessons that influenced me on a deeper level. It was a privilege to have the time to talk to students, colleagues, and encountering different centers, institutes, and projects.

One general and notable reflection is that higher education (at least in a Western context) is quite homogeneous and as a Swede teaching in the US is in most parts like teaching and working back home. The pedagogy and ideas of how to do teaching is similar. Some differences are mostly a consequence of resources and size.

A main and obvious difference is the entrusted freedom given to instructors in designing a course. I think this both makes good use of the instructor's expertise and motivates to offer an updated and interesting course.

One major learning from the sabbatical is the system of using graduate and master students to tutor and help new students to understand course content, discuss the literature, and improve their study techniques. My impression is also that it is to the benefit of the more experienced students since it is a teaching practice. I think this is an underused practice at Swedish universities, and that it would be possible to find a version of it more applicable to a Swedish context. I think it might be necessary to find some alternative to monetary remuneration, such as some sort of certificate or diploma.

A second lesson or learning is to devote more time to introduce students to some general ground rules regarding communication between students and teachers. This is of course not a question of highest importance, but it was nevertheless a notable difference.

A third lesson is to a larger extent involve the students in co-creating some aspects of the course. Both to make them partly responsible for the course and thereby giving them a small sense of ownership, but also as a mean to make the course more relevant and interesting for them. This needs of course to be done within the framework of the syllabus. However, most of the more detailed content of a course is not specified in the syllabus and could be decided after the course start. This is an avenue that I think can be interesting to develop further, possibly on courses at advanced or semi-advanced level.

A fourth lesson would be to try to help students that struggle with their studies. Not only having available resources when they ask for help (which I think we have at our university) but contacting students that we teachers can identify are struggling with their studies. To catch them early and push or encourage them to make use of the available resources. This is of course done sometimes, but not in a very systematic way. In some ways I think that we are somewhat hesitant to approach struggling students and expect the students to be mature and responsible enough to do this on their own. Perhaps this could also be an opportunity to use more experienced students to help out and to mentor and guide students that need to improve their study technique or their methodological skills.

A fifth lesson is from the mid-term meeting with STINT and the other fellows at Ohio State University. There we listened to how they use mid-course evaluations to help teachers find out how to improve their teaching and make their courses more useful and relevant for the students. The idea was to have external evaluators coming in and asking the students a set of questions,

and then summarizing and presenting this to the teacher. I found this interesting, and something that possibly could be of use, and a way to engage students in the design of the course. I had similar dialogues with students at Malmö university, and always left those meetings with some relevant and constructive feedback from the students. It is also an opportunity to explain to the students the reasons and motives behind the design of the course – which most often gives them a better understanding about the factors and resources that limit and constrain our work.

Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude and to say thank you to all who helped me before and during the sabbatical. The helpful people at STINT, Hans Pohl and Mirja Cedercrantz, the amazing staff at Luskin School of Public Affairs, Stacey Hirose, Ronaldo Avina, Kevin Franco, and Cristy Portlock, the colleagues at Luskin's, Martin Gilens and Mark Peterson, my fellow STINT comrade at UCLA, Adrienne Sörbom, and finally my colleagues at Malmö university who were involved in the application process, Magnus Ericson and Cecilia Christersson.

I will end this report on a positive note and share a mail from one student that I received after communicating the grades to them. In the end the enjoyment with our profession is working together with the students to explore and understand the world, and hopefully by doing so helping them to grow personally and professionally.

*Dear Professor Nilsson,*

*I hope you are doing well! I wanted to take the time to sincerely thank you for an amazing quarter that expanded my understanding of public policy and society in general. This was the first seminar I took as an undergraduate and I must admit that on the first day, I was extremely shocked that there were so many graduate students! However, I soon found that this was a welcoming class with a kindhearted professor who did his best to facilitate thoughtful conversations. I am very appreciative of how patient and understanding you were to help us students formulate opinions and discussions, no matter how unfinished our thoughts were. Management as a whole was an entirely new subject for me but despite lacking professional work experience that many of my peers already possessed, I was able to learn a lot from this seminar and even discussed class materials and my final paper with my father, who used to be in a managerial position at a local government department. I also enjoyed writing my final paper and I hope you had a bit of fun reading it as well. Looking forward, I can't wait to find ways to apply my new public management knowledge in my professional endeavors!*

*I hope you had an amazing experience at UCLA and thank you again for teaching our seminar so brilliantly! May you and your loved ones stay in good health, and I hope your son has been enjoying his soccer academy.*

*En lärare som du är inte lätt att hitta! :)*