

PIA8617: RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODOLOGY, AND ETHICS

Effective Term

Semester A 2025/26

Part I Course Overview

Course Title

Research Design, Methodology, and Ethics

Subject Code

PIA - Public and International Affairs

Course Number

8617

Academic Unit

Public and International Affairs (PIA)

College/School

College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences (CH)

Course Duration

One Semester

Credit Units

3

Level

R8 - Research Degree

Medium of Instruction

English

Medium of Assessment

English

Prerequisites

Nil

Precursors

Nil

Equivalent Courses

POL8617 Research Design, Methodology, and Ethics

Exclusive Courses

Nil

Part II Course Details

Abstract

This course is a key component of the PhD program in Public and International Affairs, providing students with a solid grounding in the principles of research design and the ethical foundations of social inquiry. Rather than focusing narrowly on the technical details of particular methods, the course addresses the broader choices, dilemmas, and problems that all social science research must confront, regardless of methodological approach. These include how to formulate meaningful and original research questions, how to conceptualize and operationalize key concepts, how to think critically about measurement, and how to design strategies that connect theory to evidence in a coherent and rigorous way. Throughout the course, students will engage with issues that cut across methodological traditions, such as the role of inference, the trade-offs involved in different research strategies, and the ethical responsibilities of researchers. A variety of approaches will be used as illustrations—including surveys, experiments, case studies, interviews, and the use of secondary data—but the emphasis will remain on the underlying design challenges common to them all. By grappling with these questions, students will develop the ability to design research that is both methodologically sound and substantively significant, equipping them with the critical skills needed to advance their dissertations and contribute to broader scholarly debates.

Course Intended Learning Outcomes (CILOs)

CILOs	Weighting (if app.)	DEC-A1	DEC-A2	DEC-A3
1 Identify and understand the major epistemological and methodological issues underpinning social inquiry and methodology.		x	x	
2 Evaluate and explain major ethical concerns in social research, explore their implications for conducting research design and choosing appropriate research methods.		x	x	
3 Explain the major differences among various research strategies. Critically evaluate their advantages and disadvantages and learn to synthesize them where necessary and feasible.		x	x	
4 Learn and practice literature search skills. At the same time, apply academic knowledge and analytic skills to real-world problems in selected topic areas, especially in relation to students' dissertations and publications.			x	x
5 Develop the abilities to select good research topics, formulate testable hypotheses, choose appropriate research strategies, and make original and insightful arguments. Demonstrate these abilities by designing a creative and practical research project with both theoretical and empirical implications.		x	x	x

A1: Attitude

Develop an attitude of discovery/innovation/creativity, as demonstrated by students possessing a strong sense of curiosity, asking questions actively, challenging assumptions or engaging in inquiry together with teachers.

A2: Ability

Develop the ability/skill needed to discover/innovate/create, as demonstrated by students possessing critical thinking skills to assess ideas, acquiring research skills, synthesizing knowledge across disciplines or applying academic knowledge to real-life problems.

A3: Accomplishments

Demonstrate accomplishment of discovery/innovation/creativity through producing /constructing creative works/new artefacts, effective solutions to real-life problems or new processes.

Learning and Teaching Activities (LTAs)

LTAs	Brief Description	CILO No.	Hours/week (if applicable)
1	Seminar discussion	Providing opportunities for students to discuss important concepts, theories and approaches with regard to research design. Requiring students to lead class discussion so they can share alternative views and appreciate different opinions.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
2	Consultation	Encouraging students to have individual consultation with the instructor on their research topics, study plans, and selection of research methods, so that they can be better prepared for doing the class assignments and working on their dissertations.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
3	Research paper	Developing a an original research design in the form of a research proposal. This assignment is intended to help student reflect on the readings, apply the methodological principles discussed throughout the course, and work toward a proposal that will form the basis of a publishable paper.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
4	Tutorial presentation	Presenting the research plan during a tutorial, receiving critical assessment from the instructor and fellow students at the workshops. The purpose of this assignment is not only to refine students' own projects but also to develop their ability to critically assess and support the research of others.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Assessment Tasks / Activities (ATs)

	ATs	CILO No.	Weighting (%)	Remarks ("-" for nil entry)	Allow Use of GenAI?
1	Class attendance and participation	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	15	Students are expected to prepare for class, attend every class and actively participate in class discussion. There might be assignments to be prepared ahead of class, in addition to mandatory readings.	No
2	Class leading and response paper	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	20	Students will work in small groups to select two weekly readings relevant to the session's topic and to prepare and lead a class discussion. Alongside this, they will submit a written response paper of 800–1000 words, also due by the same deadline. The response paper should briefly introduce the chosen readings by explaining their relevance to the week's topic and then propose a set of discussion questions or themes for debate.	No
3	Tutorial presentation and engagement	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	25	Students are required to present their research topics and methods during tutorials, and to give feedback to other classmates' presentations.	No

4	Research paper	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	40	Students should identify an important research question and develop a research plan to address it. The purpose is to reflect on the readings, practice what is learned in class, and work out a research proposal that may become the basis of their dissertations.	No
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Continuous Assessment (%)

100

Examination (%)

0

Minimum Continuous Assessment Passing Requirement (%)

0

Minimum Examination Passing Requirement (%)

0

Assessment Rubrics (AR)**Assessment Task**

Class attendance and participation

Criterion

Students are required to attend every class, keep up with assigned readings, and actively participate in discussions. In addition to this, students will work in groups to take turns and lead the discussion of two readings each week

Excellent

(A+, A, A-) An excellent level of understanding and knowledge of theoretical, methodological and ethical issues concerning research design in the social sciences, an excellent ability to critically analyze and evaluate academic literature and to engage in theoretically informed and empirically sound analysis, and an excellent capacity to develop original research questions and to formulate well-designed research strategies.

Good

(B+, B, B-) A good level of understanding and knowledge of theoretical, methodological and ethical issues concerning research design in the social sciences, a strong ability to critically analyze and evaluate academic literature and to engage in theoretically informed and empirically sound analysis, and a good capacity to develop original research questions and to formulate well- designed research strategies.

Marginal

(C+, C, C-) A moderate level of understanding and knowledge of theoretical, methodological and ethical issues concerning research design in the social sciences, a moderate ability to critically analyze and evaluate academic literature and to engage in theoretically informed and empirically sound analysis, and a moderate capacity to develop original research questions and to formulate well-designed research strategies.

Failure

(F) A poor level of understanding and knowledge of theoretical, methodological and ethical issues concerning research design in the social sciences, a poor ability to critically analyze and evaluate academic literature and to engage in theoretically informed and empirically sound analysis, and a poor capacity to develop original research questions and to formulate well- designed research strategies.

Assessment Task

Tutorial presentation

Criterion

Students are expected to present their research in class during tutorials, and to provide constructive feedback on other students' research projects.

Excellent

(A+, A, A-) An excellent level of understanding and knowledge of theoretical, methodological and ethical issues concerning research design in the social sciences, an excellent ability to develop an original research design, an excellent performance in helping other students improve their project.

Good

(B+, B) A good level of understanding and knowledge of theoretical, methodological and ethical issues concerning research design in the social sciences, a good ability to develop an original research design, a good performance in helping other students improve their project.

Marginal

(B-, C+, C) A moderate level of understanding and knowledge of theoretical, methodological and ethical issues concerning research design in the social sciences, a moderate ability to develop an original research design, a moderate performance in helping other students improve their project.

Failure

(F) A poor level of understanding and knowledge of theoretical, methodological and ethical issues concerning research design in the social sciences, a poor ability to develop an original research design, a poor performance in helping other students improve their project.

Assessment Task

Research paper

Criterion

The research proposal should include original research questions, critical review of the existent literature, well- defined concepts and variables, suitable research methods and procedures, expected findings; and theoretical and practical implications of the proposed research.

Excellent

(A+, A, A-) An excellent level of understanding and knowledge of theoretical, methodological and ethical issues concerning research design in the social sciences, an excellent ability to critically analyze and evaluate academic literature and to engage in theoretically informed and empirically sound analysis, and an excellent capacity to develop original research questions and to formulate well- designed research strategies.

Good

(B+, B) A good level of understanding and knowledge of theoretical, methodological and ethical issues concerning research design in the social sciences, a strong ability to critically analyze and evaluate academic literature and to engage in theoretically informed and empirically sound analysis, and a good capacity to develop original research questions and to formulate well- designed research strategies.

Marginal

(B-, C+, C) A moderate level of understanding and knowledge of theoretical, methodological and ethical issues concerning research design in the social sciences, a moderate ability to critically analyze and evaluate academic literature and to engage in theoretically informed and empirically sound analysis, and a moderate capacity to develop original research questions and to formulate well- designed research strategies.

Failure

(F) A poor level of understanding and knowledge of theoretical, methodological and ethical issues concerning research design in the social sciences, a poor ability to critically analyze and evaluate academic literature and to engage in theoretically informed and empirically sound analysis, and a poor capacity to develop original research questions and to formulate well- designed research strategies.

Part III Other Information**Keyword Syllabus**

Purposes of social research; Research process; Production of knowledge; Theory and empirics; Paradigms; Literature review; Research ethics; Research design; Causal inference; Conceptualization; Measurement; Qualitative methods; Interviews; Comparative method; Case study analysis; Quantitative methods; Statistics; Text analysis; Ethnography; Sampling; Surveys; Experiments.

Reading List**Compulsory Readings**

	Title
1	King, G., Keohane, R. O. and Verba, S. (1994) <i>Designing Social Inquiry</i> . Princeton University Press.
2	Geddes, B. (2003) <i>Paradigms and Sand Castles: Theory Building and Research Design in Comparative Politics</i> . University of Michigan Press.

Additional Readings

	Title
1	Babbie, Earl. <i>The Practice of Social Research</i> , 15th or newer edition. (Australia: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2013).
2	Kellstedt, P. M. & Whitten, G. D. (2018) <i>The fundamentals of political science research – 3rd Edition</i> . Cambridge University Press.
3	Brady, Henry E. and David Collier. <i>Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools and Shared Standards</i> (Lanham, MD.:Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004)
4	Box-Steffensmeier, Janet M., Henry E. Brady and David Collier, eds., <i>The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology</i> (Oxford ; New York : Oxford University Press, 2008)
5	George, Alexander L. and Andrew Bennett. <i>Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences</i> (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005).
6	Mahoney, James and Dietrich Rueschemeyer. <i>Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences</i> (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003)