

Course guide | Formulating and answering research questions

Lecturers

Dr. Merlijn van Hulst (Tilburg University)

Dr. Dimiter Toshkov (Leiden University)

Date and location

17-21 February 2020, Utrecht

This seminar explores general issues of research design in public administration and political science. It engages with some fundamental epistemological and methodological questions from a variety of perspectives, as well as with more practical issues related to the formulation of a research question, the choice of research approach, and the development of the elements of the research plan.

We will discuss how different methodological assumptions underlying research are manifested in designing research projects and in analyzing and presenting the data collected in the context of this design. In particular, we will cover the construction of research questions; the selection of research goals; the fit between goals, questions and research design; the selection of cases or sites to research and evidence to collect; and strategies for enhancing the trustworthiness (e.g., reliability, validity, credibility) and relevance (generalizability, practical significance, and scientific contribution) of research projects.

The course takes place over five days. The method of instruction will be based on a combination of lectures, discussions of the assigned reading with the active participation of the students, and discussions of the PhD research proposals of the participants. The lectures and discussions of existing literature will focus on the basic principles and applications of social science research. The participants will have a chance to develop and present their research plans and to get feedback from their peers and from the instructors on their ideas.

After finishing this course, students will be better able to:

- Explain the epistemological and methodological assumptions underlying their PhD thesis research;
- Understand, assess and discuss the epistemological and methodological assumptions in the work of other researchers working in public administration and political science;
- Construct well-formulated research questions that pose clear and appropriate research goals;
- Develop the elements of research designs;
- Understand the connections between research design choices with (1) research questions and goals, on the one hand, and (2) the validity/reliability or credibility and relevance of research results, on the other hand;
- Justify their research design choices as well as critically evaluate and discuss the research design choices of other projects and researchers;
- Understand the uses and limits of social-scientific inference.

Requirements

Attendance; completing required readings prior to course start; assignment submitted two weeks prior to course start.

For the course, the students are requested to hand in an assignment that outlines their design and methodological choices. This assignment is assessed by the course instructors before the students enter the course.

Readings (required)

Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative inquiry*, 12(2), 219-245.

Schwartz-Shea, P. and Yanow, D. (2012). *Interpretive research design: Concepts and processes*. New York: Routledge.

Toshkov, D. (2016). *Research Design in Political Science*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

A list of optional readings will be shared with the students before the course.

Credits

5 EC