

Evaluation-form

Course-code: PECOS4021

Course title: Research methods

Language: Norwegian English

Course convener's evaluation of the course:

This was the last iteration for PECOS4021, before the course is replaced as part of the broader reform of methods courses. Since its inception in 2012, PECOS4021 has been part of the first semester. With the division in three teaching slots introduced in 2019, the course has been held in August-September, as the first course the students take as part of the programme.

The basic structure of the course takes the students from philosophy of science via research design to a set of specific qualitative methods, concluding with discussions on validity, reliability and transparency. Assessment is two-pronged, based on a three-hour written exam and a term paper. Teaching includes ten lectures as well as four seminars intended primarily to support the students' work on their term papers. Additionally, the course had weekly study groups / colloquiums as part of the department's pilot scheme in 2021.

For 2021, two new lecturers were brought in to complement what had otherwise been the sole responsibility of Øivind Bratberg as course convener. Anne-Kathrine Kreft took on the responsibility for two lectures – on research interviews and on fieldwork and research ethics, respectively – and James Cameron held one lecture on archival research and process tracing. Both opted to do lectures geared towards research experience within their domains and with a clear ambition to provide students with operational skills towards their thesis research. The syllabus for the course was brought closer to that of STV4020A, with the Halperin & Heath textbook providing a backbone.

Overall, the changes introduced in 2021 seemed to work very well, and students performed impressively in both exam and term papers. The term paper format of critically assessing published work is a difficult genre, and there were some shortcomings in how the seminars worked in this regard. More on this specific point below.

Summary of feedback from student contact-point:

Jamie Withorne filled the role of student contact. Key observations communicated from her on behalf of fellow students are listed here.

Students have been very happy with the operational turn in the course (particularly impressed with Dr. Kreft's reflections on interviews and fieldwork) and they have appreciated the research application side of things.

In terms of challenges, people are having a bit more difficulties with the seminars and colloquiums as opposed to the lecture itself.

For the seminars, people have found that it is a bit difficult to comment on sketches for the term papers without prior knowledge of the research articles that are being discussed. This is obviously a bit difficult to deal with given the compressed timeline, but some thought it might be useful to compress the groups into smaller sections of people dealing with the same article if at all possible.

With respect to the colloquium, people have found that it is really nice to discuss the lecture subject matter. However, because the colloquium leader isn't currently enrolled in the lecture, and it is not necessarily their speciality, it can be a bit difficult to get a straightforward answer from the more abstract ideas.

Suggestions for improvements:

The course convenor has been involved in PECOS4021 most of the years since its inception in 2012. I believed there has not been a more successful iteration of the course. Students were presented with a range of topics which were structured more logically and more pedagogically than before.

PECOS students are recruited from a variety of backgrounds, in terms of specific skills and knowledge from their undergraduate degrees as well as academic and cultural context more generally. Bringing everyone onto the same page in knowledge and skills is a challenge with as compact a teaching period. However, intensive teaching and discussion can accomplish a lot – and compared with the remote teaching through Zoom in 2020, this iteration represented a massive step forward.

The format of the term paper still leaves something to be desired. The idea has been to help students acquire critical skills in reading, assessing and reflecting upon methodological aspects of published research. In their papers, they are asked to select one of a dozen suggested journal articles to discuss on the basis of specific lecture topics (ranging from, say, design issues in comparative analysis, via process-tracing strategies to ethical challenges in fieldwork via validity concerns in textual analysis). It is challenging for students to delve into selected methodological topics and develop their own independent arguments while running alongside the course teaching. While this challenge is generally handled well, the seminars supporting this work is generally more difficult to structure, cf. the comment from the student contact above.

Any general methods course for MA students is a balancing act – between the abstract and conceptual and the operational and experience-based; between research design considerations and specific methods; between specific research domains and more general aspects of social science research. PECOS4021 has taken vast steps in the last few years in striking a better balance on all of these, transformed as it has been from a cross-disciplinary compromise to a course much better honed to the peace and conflict-oriented, research-aspiring students at PECOS. I wish the successor course the best of luck in extending and further improving on this development.

Øivind Bratberg, 25 February 2022