

LSE

Department of
Methodology



MY400/500: Fundamentals of Research Design

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This document contains important information. Before seeking help, please make sure to read it thoroughly as it may answer your question.

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1. Course Information

Research design is central to the production of knowledge. To understand the world, we need credible evidence and robust theories. For our theories to remain relevant and useful, they must be tested and refined with data. To answer our research questions, we need systematic data collection and analysis. All this requires research designs that align with the scope, focus and objectives of our studies.

This course aims to explore the importance and challenges of research design and introduce you to a broad range of design options. Drawing on a variety of examples, we explore design considerations and options across research from quantitative, qualitative and mixed methodological traditions. By the end of the course, you will be able to critically analyze a wide range of empirical social science research, evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different methodological choices, understand the importance of social scientific theory, and craft and defend a well-reasoned research design. This means that you will be better equipped to implement these designs in your empirical dissertation/capstone.

The course builds on the premise that the way we conduct research depends on the nature of the research question and the type of evidence available. Every decision in the research process comes with strengths, weaknesses, and trade-offs. As we progress through the course, these trade-offs will become evident, and you will develop a deeper understanding of how design choices impact research outcomes, both in published work and in your own research.

You will also learn how to motivate and frame studies. You will read academic papers in the seminars and critically assess how existing studies are framed and the logic behind their design choices. How do the authors position their work within the existing literature? Are the research questions and hypotheses clear and achievable? How is the study theoretically grounded? What role does the theory play? Does the design align with the study's objectives, and what kinds of inferences can be drawn? How do the findings support or challenge the theoretical framework? Are the conclusions backed by strong evidence?

This course will help elevate your dissertation or capstone project. Because the course is assessed by you developing your own research proposal, you will gain hands-on experience in crafting a coherent narrative from the ground up. What are your research questions and why are they significant? What drives your interest in the topic and what do you aim to contribute? How does your work relate to ongoing academic conversations (aka the literature)? How will your research design enable you to gather the necessary data to answer your questions? Are you testing hypotheses or developing new ones? Is your project focused on prediction or description, or is it a causal problem? What will your core arguments be?

Thinking like a social scientist

Overall, this course helps you build a solid understanding of the foundational elements of the social sciences. Together we will explore key questions:

- What are the objectives of a study?
- What is the "literature"? How do we review existing literature in our work, and how do we contribute to it by designing and testing new research questions?
- What is theory, and how does it connect to data?
- How do different types of research questions relate to different research designs?
- What are ethics, reflexivity, and writing in research?
- What constitutes a case study, and what are the logics of comparison?
- What is description versus prediction in quantitative or computational research?
- How is causation addressed in quantitative and computational research?

- What is meaning-making in qualitative research?
- How can we integrate different methodological traditions?

Theory is core to the social sciences

You will learn how theory drives the design, analysis and conclusions of a study. You will explore how theory shapes research questions and design and how to critically evaluate the role that theory plays. A well-conducted study not only contributes to our (incomplete and uncertain) knowledge, but also advances the theoretical debates within our literature. You will learn to recognize “theoretical window-dressing”—where one theory could be swapped for another without changing the study's outcomes, revealing the lack of a proper research design.

Inference is core to the social sciences

Inference, like theory, is fundamental to the social sciences. You may initially think of inference in terms of description, prediction, causality or measurement. But inference is broader than it. Inference means moving between the general and the specific, so it appears in the relationship between theory and data, in how cases are selected, in framing your research within broader contexts, and in drawing out the theoretical implications of your findings.

Framing is core to the social sciences

Faculty in the Department of Methodology evaluate dissertations/capstones each year and marks and feedback are often linked to issues covered in this course. Are the research questions well-grounded in a relevant social science literature? Is there a strong theoretical motivation? Is there coherence between research design and the research questions? Does the student demonstrate a deep understanding of different inference logics? Is the writing clear, and is the argumentation rigorous? This course provides you with the essential tools to excel in your dissertation/capstone.

1.1. Teaching syllabus and schedule

Week	Lecture	Seminar	Paper(s)
1	From research topics to research questions (JJ)		
2	Theory and data (JJ)	From research topics to research questions	Sandberg, Jörgen, and Mats Alvesson. "Ways of Constructing Research Questions: Gap-Spotting or Problematization?" <i>Organization</i> 18, no. 1 (January 15, 2011): 23–44.
3	Desk-based research (JJ)	Theory and data	Fiorito T. Rm and Nicholls, W. J. 2016 "Silencing to Give Voice: Backstage Preparations in the Undocumented Youth Movement in Los Angeles" <i>Qualitative Sociology</i> 39: 287-308.
			Legate, N., Ngyuen, T. V., Weinstein, N., Moller, A., Legault, L., Vally, Z., ... & Ogbonnaya, C. E. (2022). A global experiment on motivating social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. <i>Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences</i> , 119(22).
4	From research questions to research designs (JJ)	Desk-based research	Knopf, J. W. (2006). Doing a literature review. <i>PS: Political Science & Politics</i> , 39(1), 127-132.
			Fatehkia, M., Kashyap, R., & Weber, I. (2018). Using Facebook ad data to track the global digital gender gap. <i>World Development</i> , 107, 189-209.
5	Ethics, reflexivity, writing (EK)	From research questions to research designs	Dietrich, B.J., Sands, M.L. Seeing racial avoidance on New York City streets. <i>Nature Human Behaviour</i> 7, 1275–1281 (2023). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-023-01589-7
			Jones, J. A. (2022). "They Are There with Us": Theorizing Racial Status and Intergroup Relations. <i>American Journal of Sociology</i> , 128(2), 411-461. https://doi.org/10.1086/721467
7	Case studies and comparison (EK)	Ethics, reflexivity, writing	No paper: Peer review exercise
8	Description and prediction in quantitative / computational research (DDK)	Case studies and comparison	Anna Calasanti & Bailey Gerrits (2021) "You're not my nanny!" Responses to racialized women leaders during COVID-19, <i>Politics, Groups, and Identities</i>
9	Causation in quantitative / computational research (DDK)	Description and prediction	Holmes, C.E., Guliford, M.K., Mendoza-Davé, M.A.S. and Jurkovich, M., 2023. A Case for Description. <i>PS: Political Science & Politics</i> , pp.1-6.
			Chetty, R., Jackson, M.O., Kuchler, T., Stroebe, J., Hendren, N., Fluegge, R.B., Gong, S., Gonzalez, F., Grondin, A., Jacob, M. and Johnston, D., 2022. Social capital I: measurement and associations with economic mobility. <i>Nature</i> , 608(7921), pp.108-121.

10	Meaning-making in qualitative research (RS)	Causation	Angrist, J.D. and Pischke, J.S., 2009. Mostly harmless econometrics: An empiricist's companion. Princeton University Press. Chapter 1.
			Hernán, M.A., 2018. The C-word: scientific euphemisms do not improve causal inference from observational data. American Journal of Public Health, 108(5), pp.616-619.
			Abdelgadir, A. and Fouka, V., 2020. Political secularism and Muslim integration in the West: Assessing the effects of the French headscarf ban. American Political Science Review, 114(3), pp.707-723.
11	Mixing methodological traditions (JJ & RS)	Meaning-making	Susewind, R. (2021). Dreaming in the shadow of history: Micro-mobilities and belonging in Lucknow. Contemporary South Asia 49(4), 500-513. doi: 10.1080/09584935.2021.1995329

Seminar groups

Code	Teaching Title	Type	Grp	Day	Room	Start	Finish	AT Wks
MY400	MY400.1 Fundamentals of Social Science Research Design	MY400	1	Tue	SAL.LG.02	16:00	17:30	2,3,4,5,7,8,9,10,11
MY400	MY400.1 Fundamentals of Social Science Research Design	MY400	2	Wed	CKK.1.15	10:30	12:00	2,3,4,5,7,8,9,10,11
MY400	MY400.1 Fundamentals of Social Science Research Design	MY400	3	Wed	PAN.1.03	14:00	15:30	2,3,4,5,7,8,9,10,11
MY400	MY400.1 Fundamentals of Social Science Research Design	MY400	6	Tue	PAN.1.04	12:30	14:00	2,3,4,5,7,8,9,10,11
MY400	MY400.1 Fundamentals of Social Science Research Design	MY400	7	Tue	PAN.1.04	11:00	12:30	2,3,4,5,7,8,9,10,11
MY400	MY400.2 Fundamentals of Social Science Research Design (ASDS Students Only)	MY400	4	Mon	FAW.3.01	10:30	12:00	2,3,4,5,7,8,9,10,11
MY400	MY400.2 Fundamentals of Social Science Research Design (ASDS Students Only)	MY400	5	Mon	CBG.1.10	10:00	11:30	2,3,4,5,7,8,9,10,11
MY400	MY400.2 Fundamentals of Social Science Research Design (ASDS Students Only)	MY400	8	Thu	FAW.2.03	10:00	11:30	2,3,4,5,7,8,9,10,11
MY400	MY400.3 Fundamentals of Social Science Research Design (SRM students only)	MY400	9	Mon	CKK.2.18	16:00	17:30	2,3,4,5,7,8,9,10,11
MY500	MY500 Fundamentals of Social Science Research Design	MY500	1	Tue	CKK.1.18	10:30	12:00	2,3,4,5,7,8,9,10,11
MY4IR	MY4IR.2 Research Design for International Relations (IR-R and IPE-R only)	MY4IR	1	Wed	CKK.1.09	15:00	16:30	2,3,4,5,7,8,9,10,11
MY4IR	MY4IR.1 Research Design for International Relations	MY4IR	2	Mon	SAL.B.01	16:00	17:30	2,3,4,5,7,8,9,10,11
MY4IR	MY4IR.1 Research Design for International Relations	MY4IR	3	Mon	SAL.G.09	10:30	12:00	2,3,4,5,7,8,9,10,11
MY4IR	MY4IR.1 Research Design for International Relations	MY4IR	4	Tue	OLD.1.28	10:30	12:00	2,3,4,5,7,8,9,10,11
MY4IR	MY4IR.1 Research Design for International Relations	MY4IR	5	Mon	SAL.G.06	12:00	13:30	2,3,4,5,7,8,9,10,11
MY4IR	MY4IR.1 Research Design for International Relations	MY4IR	6	Tue	CLM.1.02	12:30	14:00	2,3,4,5,7,8,9,10,11
MY4IR	MY4IR.1 Research Design for International Relations	MY4IR	7	Wed	KSW.1.05	12:00	13:30	2,3,4,5,7,8,9,10,11

1.2. Teachers

The lecturers are:

- Jon Jackson
- Eleanor Knott
- Daniel De Kadt
- Raphael Susewind

The seminar leaders are:

- Seila Panizzolo
- Linda Li
- Isaac Haruna Ziaba
- Jon Jackson
- Zach Dickson

1.3. Course Enrolment and Auditors

MY400/500 online material, including lecture recordings and reading lists, are available for all LSE students to use (more info about auditing the passive parts of the Methodology courses [here](#)).

Please consider that teachers will not be able to provide feedback on your work and give you practical advice if you are not an enrolled student. Due to the risk of plagiarism, they cannot co-produce with you the choices that will end up in your assignments and dissertations (e.g. Is this a well-formulated research question? Which type of documents should I use? etc.). Making these choices with you/instead of you would not only go against LSE regulations but also against one of the objectives of the module. The goal of MY400/500 is to teach students how to make autonomous decisions for them to produce their own research project. If you have not taken the module but are interested in learning more about how to design research, I encourage you to:

- Make use of this Moodle space of [MY400/500](#) to familiarise yourself with the logic of research design and learn good practices in designing research. Read the slides, watch the videos, use the reading list with selected readings: all represent good opportunities to learn more about designing research on your own.
- Consider attending the [methods surgery](#) if you have a specific question relative to methods that you would like to ask.

1.4. Office hours

Booking via [LSE Student Hub](#) only. You can find details of your teacher's office hours on the Student Hub.

Some things to bear in mind:

- Office hours are held in term time and during reading week. Office hours are not held outside term time (e.g. during the Christmas break). You should plan accordingly if you want to meet a teacher on the course.
- If you make an office hour appointment to discuss feedback from your formative assignment, you should make sure to have worked on developing the assignment so that you can discuss the progress you have made individually on the project since the feedback.
- Office hours are an opportunity to discuss your research ideas one-on-one with your instructor. However, one-on-one guidance also has a negative effect as it may discourage students from asking their questions in class, which therefore increases feelings of isolation and prevents the emergence of a supportive and connected cohort. Most often, the issues and challenges that you face are not personal to you but are collectively shared. Asking questions in seminars and lectures enables you to realise that these challenges are collectively experienced, to learn from each other and to create a team spirit essential to a good learning environment.

- For questions of methodology not related to topics discussed in lectures and seminars, the Department of Methodology offers a weekly **walk-in 'methods surgery'** where staff and students can drop in for advice on methods-related problems they may have. Two members of staff, one with a background in quantitative methods and the other in qualitative methods, will be present at each session to help with a range of methodological problems. You can find more information on the [Department of Methodology website](#).
- Office hours are not designed for individual tutoring and co-producing the assignment with the teachers, as this runs a risk of plagiarism, according to LSE regulations. Students are responsible for autonomously making the research design decisions that will end up being assessed in their research project (see below about plagiarism).
- Based on the formative assignment, seminar teachers will encourage some students to book an office hours appointment if it is considered that the project requires a fundamental shift. Formative feedback by the seminar teacher and peer-feedback are designed to help students identify whether they are on the correct track. If your feedback does not invite you to meet your seminar teacher to discuss your project, that means you should confidently go ahead and keep working on your project.

1.5. Getting help with MY400/500

The **MY400/500 Moodle webpage** is your first point of reference to check for all information, materials and activities related to this course. It hosts course materials including lecture slides, links to readings, and instructions for submission.

For questions concerning course administration, timetables, registration and assessment: contact the **course administrator** at methodology.admin@lse.ac.uk.

For questions regarding the **content of the module**: we encourage you to either ask your question directly during lectures and seminars or book an office hours appointment with **your seminar teacher**.

2. Formative and Summative Assessments

See the following documents on the MY400/500 Moodle page:

- **MY400/500 - Things to read before starting your formative assignment** (under the section, 'Formative assignment')
- **MY400/500 - Things to read before starting your summative assignment** (under the section, 'Summative assignment')

3. Plagiarism

3.1. 'All work presented for assessment must be the student's own work' and use of generative AI tools

Plagiarism is an academic offence that is taken seriously at LSE. As per [LSE Regulations on Assessment Offences: Plagiarism](#):

"Assessment forms a significant part of the process by which the School monitors its own standards of teaching and student support. It therefore follows that all work presented for assessment must be the student's own work."

By "student's own work", this means, for instance, that students:

- Should not submit work developed with other people (for example, group work) for an individual assignment, even if this work has been developed outside LSE;
- Should not pay other people to do any part of the work they will be assessed for.
- Either of these actions would represent a case of academic misconduct and will be subject to an LSE misconduct panel hearing.

You are permitted to use ChatGPT and other generative AI tools in limited and specific circumstances to support your learning. You may use them to check and improve your writing and grammar. You are not permitted to ask a generative AI tool to help you generate (for your formative or summative assignment)

your research topic, literature review, research question, and research design. In general, these tools may be used to check your work, but not to produce work for you. After all, the objective of this course is for you to learn skills and internalise the criteria of good research design, for you to learn how to autonomously produce a research project of the highest level.

If you are ever unsure about whether the use of a generative AI tool is appropriate, please ask. We generally recommend that you think about your reliance of these tools in the same way you might consider relying on a reasonably capable friend, colleague, or family member in your learning. Ask for help when you are stuck, need fresh eyes on some writing, or need some inspiration. You should always assume that generative tools, like capable friends, colleagues, and family, are highly fallible, produce errors, and lack contextual understanding that may be relevant for this or other courses. Like any learning support, generative AI tools must be used with skill, responsibility, and caution.

NB: For modules assessed by a research project such as MY400/500, feedback and office hours happen during the time of preparation of the assignment. If the module was assessed by an exam, this would be equivalent to students leaving the exam room and asking their teachers to help them brainstorm the answers to their exam. Therefore, we need to be careful that students are responsible for all the choices on which they will be assessed. For example, if constructing a research question is part of the skills they will be assessed on, then teachers cannot/should not help them formulate their research question, otherwise the work is not the student's own work but is co-created with someone else. In this case, to comply with LSE's Regulations on Assessment Offences, the feedback students receive will deal with the skills they need to acquire and the criteria they need to internalise rather than formulating answers with them or making choices for them. By choices, I mean for example answering questions such as "what method is the best for my research project?", "which readings should I read?", "what documents should I use?" etc.

The objective of MY400/500 is for you to learn skills and internalise the criteria of good research design, for you to learn how to autonomously produce a research project of the highest level.

These are only a few examples of misconduct falling under the scope of plagiarism. To learn more about the risks of plagiarism, please read [LSE's Regulations on Assessment Offences: Plagiarism](#). By submitting your work, you are confirming that you have read the LSE regulations on plagiarism and that the work you are submitting is your own. **The Department of Methodology uses plagiarism detection software.**

3.2. Self-plagiarism

Work submitted for assignment must be **original**. That means that a piece of work may only be submitted for assessment once either to the LSE or elsewhere. If the student is taking other research methods courses, the MY400/500 project must differ somewhat to coursework submitted to these courses. This is because, by integrating the feedback you have received for your MY400/500 assignment, you could submit a more elaborated project in an WT assignment. If you have questions, your seminar teacher can advise you on this during office hours

3.3. Allowance for Dissertations

Modules like MY400/500 help you acquire skills that you may want to use in your dissertation and are therefore often assessed via an exploratory project or a research proposal. To account for this and encourage students to take advantage of this opportunity, LSE rules on [self-plagiarism](#) make a specific allowance for the use within your dissertation project:

"However, earlier essay work may be used as an element of a dissertation, provided that the amount of earlier work used is acceptable to the department and the work is properly referenced. Students wanting to use earlier work must seek clarification from the relevant department or institute."

The information about how much from your MY400/500 assignment you can re-use for your dissertation project lies in your home department (e.g. can you use the same research question? can you copy-paste a literature review paragraph?...). We encourage you to find this information sooner than later to avoid unnecessary stress. The ultimate responsibility for your dissertation rests on you and your home department, not the methodology department (your MY400/500 teachers cannot answer this question). **I encourage you to look into your department handbook to know the rules of your department before starting your formative assignment to avoid unnecessary stress or needing to change topics.**

4. Course Material

Every week, a “Weekly Prep” document will be posted under the Weekly topic on the MY400/500 Moodle webpage. This document informs you of the readings and activities you need to prepare for that week. Readings are available on the [MY400/500 Reading List](#) page and under each topic on the Moodle webpage. For each topic, we identify one or two essential readings, as well as additional methodological readings and those that demonstrate the method. The essential readings give you the important background on a topic. We will discuss them in seminars and/or in the lectures depending on the weekly schedule (check the Weekly Prep document for the reading guide questions that we will use to start discussions).

These sets of readings are your starting point for understanding the method and for preparing for weekly seminars. The module’s reading list cannot cover all disciplines and all sub-types of methods. This is a postgraduate research module in methodology – **to do well in your summative assignment, you need to read methodological literature beyond the essential reading.** You need to read extensively, and we expect to see evidence of your methodological readings in your assignment.

In most cases, you will have to read beyond this reading list, especially those relevant to your very topic and approach, to ensure you are best equipped for your summative assignment. In your summative and formative assignments, you will also need to draw on readings from your substantive courses in your MSc degree to inform your choice of research problem and question. You also need to cite this literature in your formative and summative assignment.

5. If you need help with your dissertation

See the Section “If you need help with your dissertation” on the Moodle of MY400/500 for the hyperlinks.

5.1. Your home department

MY400/500 provides students with opportunities to learn skills that will be very useful for their dissertation. However, MY400/500 teachers are not dissertation supervisors. They are here to teach skills and general research design principles, not to accompany students after the end of the module until their dissertation deadline. These roles are the responsibility of the home departments of students.

5.2. LSE LIFE

LSE LIFE offers help with writing your dissertation. Have a look at the online material provided by LSE LIFE if you find yourself in need of such advice and don't hesitate to attend their training sessions or reach out to them.

- Workshops: LSE LIFE offers a wide range of activities built around a series of topic areas including writing, reading, referencing and being organised. In keeping with this term’s overarching themes are managing time - getting things done AND taking breaks - preparing for summer assessments, and dissertation work.
- Online resources: LSE LIFE has been adding content on their Moodle page and making them easier to find and use. From the basics of essay structure and referencing sources, to getting creative with the literature review, to editing, polishing, and proofreading texts - there are activities for every student.
- One-to-one appointments: LSE LIFE offers our one-to-one appointments online and on campus.

- LSE LIFE has always been a place for students to come together - and they continue to create virtual spaces for students to meet, to work together, and to discover and exchange ideas. Their workshops, one-to-one chats, practical resources, and friendly welcome continue in the Lent Term - and are all available online.

5.3. Methods surgery

The Department of Methodology offers a weekly walk-in 'methods surgery' where staff and students can drop in for advice on methods-related problems they may have (no booking needed). Two members of staff, one with a background in quantitative methods and the other in qualitative methods, will be present at each session to help with a range of methodological problems.

Methods surgery are held weekly, during term-time only.