

POLI60312 Research Design and Skills

We obtained Diversifying the Curriculum funding in 2024/25 for expanding and revising the content and accessibility of course materials for POLI60312 Research Design and Skills. This is a compulsory module integral to all MA programmes in Politics intended to guide students through the intellectual and practical tasks of conceiving and developing an MA Dissertation research proposal. The module is interactive, taught through one lecture, discussion group workshops and student presentations. Students are supported in literature searching, identifying a focus and a research question, situating this in existing literature, and determining appropriate methodological approaches. These include philosophical, epistemological and ontological stances from both within and beyond the discipline, ultimately culminating in the production of a complete proposal.

What was the rationale/aim of the project?

In previous years, some students reported struggling to see the relevance of particular aspects of the research design process to their particular projects. As well as a broader reading list, the core textbook (Thomas, G. (2022) *How to Do Your Research Project* 4th ed, London: Sage) is an excellent starting point, and the module provides a step-by-step guide through key research development stages and typical proposal structures. For some, a distinct methodology chapter is appropriate; for others, methodology is integrated into a critical theoretical approach, or the approach may not be easily expressed in social scientific terms. This initiative aimed to address the needs of students undertaking more critical, esoteric or atypically structured projects.

The particular goals included making course materials fully accessible in line with best practices; researching and producing a reading list on feminist, postcolonial and decolonial research methods; incorporating these where possible into each step of the research process, or providing readings that laid out alternative ways of conceptualising research. As part of this, the intention was to build up the existing research methods database of resources (videos, podcasts, blogs) on Blackboard with additional material on critical and feminist research methods, including making videos illustrating how feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial research methods can be employed in a PGT research project.

What was the output of the project? How was it delivered to students or included in the curriculum/syllabus?

The main output was a revised reading list and lecture slides. Key reading list modifications included adding Ackerly, B.A. & True, J. (2019) *Doing feminist research in political and social science*. 2nd ed, London: Macmillan and recent journal articles on decolonising methodologies. Video resources were also added, including an NCRM Webinar series *Decolonial Research Methods: Resisting Coloniality in Academic Knowledge Production*.

The layout of slides and the course guide was revised with accessibility and general quality improvements, including all sans serif fonts, improved spacing and screen reader-friendly formatting, clearly structured tasks, alt-text for images where applicable, and consistent formatting and live hyperlinks for all online materials.

How was this received by students? Any evaluation? First impressions?

Initial impressions from course staff indicate the changes were well-received and helpful. There was a noticeable increase in dissertation projects on explicitly intersectional topics, including decolonial approaches, LGBTQ+ issues, and everyday violence, among others. Whilst this cannot be inferred as causal, students were observed engaging with new materials and references, and verbal feedback was positive.

Did you encounter any difficulties/challenges?

Practical obstructions prevented the timely production of two planned original videos. However, the inclusion of high-quality external resources, such as the NCRM Webinar series and other additional resources located and added to the course materials mitigated this as they covered similar content effectively.

A structural challenge of this module is the regular rotation of teaching staff, which makes it harder to monitor the impact of changes over time and to sustain continuous staff involvement in the module development process.

What are the next steps/plans?

As the Lead Course Convenor is changing for 2025/26, next steps are currently undecided. However, a productive next step would be to involve students more directly, perhaps through a focus group. Engaging past and present students in planning, feedback, and forms of assessment could provide more focused and substantively documented insights in learning experiences, as well as engaging students in co-production of pedagogic innovation to meet their needs.

Andrew Slack and Elena Barabantseva