

HGO4010 ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1: RESEARCH PROPOSAL

1. Instruction to students

The purpose of a research proposal is to account for methodological choices prior to conducting data collection and analysis. Consequently, you will use phrases like “I will..” and “I intend to..”, in contrast to the language of a research report, which accounts for these choices in retrospect.

The research proposal will give you an opportunity to show your ability to apply your methodological competence to a self-determined topic. You will be assessed on your ability to make methodological choices, and to reflect and communicate these choices in a convincing manner. In other words, this is not a test of your understanding of a particular research topic, but you will still need to offer a minimum of background information and theoretical context to let the reader assess the suitability of your research design.

The text cannot exceed 3000 words. It can be structured as you see fit, but should include the following elements:

- A brief background to the topic
- Some indication as to how your proposed research can be located in the academic literature
- A problem statement or research question
- A description of the overall research design and a justification of its suitability
- An account of your data collection strategy and a justification of why this is the best way to investigate your question
- An account for your data analysis strategy and a justification of why this is appropriate given your research question, empirical material and theoretical context
- A reflection anticipating and acknowledging practical challenges and ethical dilemmas and discussing how these are best solved
- An evaluation of the rigour of your proposed research design

You do not need to specify timeframe or budget in this proposal, but you should design a research project that can be carried out by a single researcher with resources comparable to an MA student. Follow department guidelines for academic citations.

2. Examiner’s guide

As an examiner, you will assess the overall quality of the research proposal in light of the instructions given above. Students are likely to use their own research project as a basis for the proposal. In some cases, TIK students will either hand in similar-looking proposal (because they write their MA projects in pairs), or identical proposals (but then as a 4,500 words text).

While the points above are relatively self-explanatory, and you are advised to consult with the readings (the Hay [2016] book as well as the articles guiding each seminar), a couple of points require some further explanation.

As for ethical guidelines, the students have been discussing unequal power relations, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, NSD guidelines, building trust in the field, revealing your subjectivity etc.

As for rigour, the students have themselves suggested criteria for incorporating rigour into a research design, based on their perusal of a variety of proposals by staff at ISS, TIK and OLA. These include:

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- The best proposals should present a coherent framework where theoretical framework informs research questions and choice of methodological strategy.
- The best proposals should be reflexive and open about the researcher's positionality, and how this affects power relations and access in the field.
- The best proposals should reflect on issues of transferability and analytical generalisability.
- The best proposals should triangulate sources or methods to enhance rigour.
- The best proposals should critically evaluate how the choice of research subjects will affect findings.
- The best proposals should discuss strengths and weaknesses of the chosen data collection strategy.
- The best proposals should include a strategy for analysing qualitative data, and discuss strengths and weakness of the chosen approach.

HGO4010 ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2: CASE PROBLEM

1. Instruction to students

The case problem exam question will be revealed to you on April 26 at 10:00 AM. This marks the start of the 10-day home exam period with a submission deadline on May 6 at 12:00 PM.

The research proposal will give you an opportunity to show your ability to apply your methodological competence to a pre-given topic. As with the research proposal, you will be assessed on your ability to make methodological choices, and to reflect and communicate these choices in a convincing manner. In other words, this is not a test of your understanding of the details of the subject matter, but on your ability to apply your methodological competence to a context somebody else has chosen for you.

The best preparation for the case problem is an active participation in group and individual exercises throughout the semester.

The text cannot exceed 3000 words. It can be structured as you see fit, as long as you answer the question given to you.

2. Exam question

Introduction

Together with a fellow student, you have embarked on a research project for your Master thesis, where your main research question is as follows:

“How are international exchange students integrated into student life at the University of Oslo, and what are the main obstacles to this integration?”

Two research components make up your research design. The first is a document study of the main policy documents governing the various exchange programmes and policies at the University of Oslo. This study is to be conducted by your collaborator, and will be supported by a handful of interviews with UiO and SiO officials in charge of international student exchange. The objective of this component is to establish how the institutions approached integration through formal mechanisms.

The second leg of the study is your responsibility, and consists of an interview study with 12 exchange students, with whom you have already established an initial contact. You intend to conduct semi-structured interviews with these students, where you ask them about their social experiences during the exchange semester. Interview transcriptions will then be subject to a thematic analysis informed by the research question. The objective of this second component is to find out how exchange student integration is experienced and practised.

The case problem

The problem arises during a meeting with your fellow student in early May. While your collaborator is already well underway with perusing documents and interviewing officials after receiving approval from the Data Protection Services (NSD), you realise that you have forgotten to notify NSD about your interview study. By the time you can expect approval from NSD, most exchange students will have returned to their home countries. By postponing the interviews until next semester, you will delay the study progress of yourself and your fellow student.

You discuss various solutions to your problem during the meeting. These include using different methods, alternative data collection techniques, targeting different subjects, and conducting data collection in ways that allows your study not to be subject to notification.

Your assignment

Write a 3000-word text where you reflect on the choices you made following this meeting concerning data collection and analysis. Write as if you evaluate your research process in hindsight. Use the same writing format and retrospective style that is common in a methods chapter of a master thesis.

3. Examiner's guide

As an examiner, you will assess the overall quality of the report on the case problem in light of the instructions given above. I would expect many students to consult with the NSD website, which states that they have a 5-week response time, although simpler designs can be processed faster. Hence, I anticipate most students to give up the idea of conducting the 12 interviews in June. However, we need to take into account that some students might “gamble” on a quicker process with the NSD or to proceed without permission.

I have spoken with NSD who states that if a student have collected personal data (e.g. email or sms correspondence asking for an interview) but wait for NSD approval before conducting the interviews, they would not treat this as an error. If the student collected personal data *and* start interview before receiving approval, they would only treat this as a minor error, as it has marginal negative impact on those concerned.

Moreover, NSD are reforming their guidelines, but at present (03.04.2019) they allow observational data and wholly anonymized interview data (meeting people randomly) based on notes (no digital record) without asking for permission. This might change, and we should consult the NSD website at the outset of the home exam period. In any case, I would allow students to follow the guidelines as of April.

You are advised to consult with the readings (the Hay [2016] book as well as the articles guiding each seminar), a couple of points require some further explanation. As for ethical guidelines, the students have been discussing unequal power relations, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, NSD guidelines, building trust in the field, revealing your subjectivity etc.

As for rigour, the students have themselves suggested criteria for evaluating rigour retrospectively in a report on conducted research. These criteria are based on their perusal of a set of MA thesis in Human Geography, as well as in TIK-, STK- and OLA-related fields. These criteria include:

- The best reports should demonstrate reflexive management, by showing how the researcher reflected on and adapted to dilemmas (cf. the ‘case problem)
- The best reports should demonstrate flexibility and sensitivity to emergent themes throughout the process
- The best reports be explicit on issues of rigour, not assume these virtues implicitly
- The best reports should explain how key concepts operationalizing rigour in research (e.g. trustworthiness, credibility, reliability, validity, reflexivity and positionality) are employed, conceptually and in practice.
- The best reports show clear and open reporting of methodological choices and practices.