

PPOL 5120: Research Methods in Public Policy

V1.0 Feb 2, 2026

Spring 2026

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Mondays, 3-5:50pm
Rm 1027, LSK Bldg

Introduction

Policy research is a problem-focused, multi- and interdisciplinary endeavor. As such, the design and implementation of policy research projects can be highly variable – and often requires making any number of decisions about data and methodology. But for those at the start of their research career, students need to develop not just mastery of particular statistical, or survey, or other data collection and analytical techniques (something which is largely covered in many of the methodology courses). Successful researchers are adept at identifying interesting and important policy questions, and carefully designing actionable research questions, building on theory and data to develop robust results, and craft careful, insightful narratives to deliver not just academic impact (i.e. fancy journal articles) but useful knowledge about the world, and how to address any number of the social problems that we face. This process is challenging, and the core of a research postgraduate degree is training researchers in the hard and soft skills that are required.

Course Description and Objectives

The purposes of the course are to introduce to students key concepts in research methods, and to help them develop skills in the design of empirical research used in the analysis of policy problems. Specific emphasis will be on the use of quasi-experimental designs in policy research, as well as on their potentials and limitations. *We will compare and contrast that with other approaches, including qualitative, interpretive, and mixed method designs, among others. Within that frame, we will introduce students to the process of research, from problem identification, through research question development, application of analytical frameworks, methodological decision making, and data collection.*

Upon completion of the course, students should 1) understand the logic of policy research on causal relationship; 2) have a working knowledge on key research designs (including, but not limited to, generalizable causal inference), with a good understanding of their potentials and limitations; 3) be able to put together a research proposal on a given research topic in their chosen fields; and 4) gain practical experience in conducting policy research.

Approach

This course is meant to be a hands-on, workshop-style seminar for MPhil, PhD, and advanced masters students interested in developing their research skills as related to public policy. Students

will be expected to actively engage, presenting their work and constructively commenting on their peers'. A number of different faculty from across PPOL will take part in sessions, lending their insights and expertise, and providing key feedback. We will collectively work through the process of designing a research project, culminating in a full research proposal.

Assignments:

- **Annotated Bibliography (work in progress): Feb 16**
- **Annotated Bibliography: 10% (Due Feb 23)**
- **Research Problem/Topic/Questions: (Due March 2)**
- **Literature Review and research question framing: 15% (Due March 16)**
- **Research Proposal: 35% (Due May 16)**
- **Homework Assignments: 15% (throughout the term – on Canvas)**
- **Class Participation: 15% (activities, short presentations in class, discussions)**

Course Plan

Session	Date	Topic
1	Feb.2	Introduction to Public Policy Research Intro to Annotated Bibliographies: What do we already know?
2	Feb 9	The Big Picture; From Policy Puzzle to Research Topic
3	Feb 16	No Class- CNY
4	Feb 23	Reviewing the literature, finding the gaps, and crafting a question
5	March 2	Drawing on Theory – Developing Analytical Frameworks
6	March 9	Operationalization: Data Collection and research ethics
7	March 16	Qualitative research 1: Prof Lejano
8	March 23	Qualitative research 2: From single cases to comparative analysis
9	March 30	Mixing Quant and Qual: big data, ML, and more: Celine Song
10	April 13	Quantitative research 1
11	April 20	Quantitative research 2
12	April 27	Quantitative research 3: Mixed Methods and integration; Intro to writing grant proposals
13	May 4	Telling the story: Presenting findings, crafting narratives;

14	TBD (May)	Proposal presentations [CNY makeup]
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Readings and other resources:

All readings are posted on Canvas

Policy on Generative AI/LLMs

The goal of this course is to increase your cognitive abilities to develop and communicate original, policy research. While we have no objection to some of the research aids that improve your ability to scan/find relevant sources of literature and data (i.e. Research Rabbit, HKUST library's Research Assistant, other resources we will discuss etc...) – we expect you to work through the (very iterative) process of brainstorming, problem identification, and project development yourself.

For this reason, unless we specifically indicate otherwise, the use of generative AI tools is not allowed. This goes double for your annotated bibliographies and literature reviews. It is absolutely crucial that you keep up with the reading, analysis, and synthesis in your core areas of expertise. Any issues at all with sloppy/fake/AI generated references will result in a 0 on the assignment; repeat offenses risk a 0 in the course and referral for academic penalties.

Graded Work and Academic Integrity:

For all of your formative and assessed work, it is expected that all assignments are original products produced by YOU. If you have questions about the proper forms for citations, or issues around paraphrasing or use of quotations, please come talk with us. If you have any concerns at all about your work, please feel free to come see us during my office hours. We are always happy to help, whether you need someone to take a look at your writing, or to try out different ideas, want some extra explanation of a concept, or even just to chat about sustainability issues that interest you.

Students are expected to adhere to the university's academic integrity policy. Students are expected to uphold HKUST's Academic Honor Code and to maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. The University has zero tolerance of academic misconduct. Please refer to [Academic Integrity | HKUST – Academic Registry](#) for the University's definition of plagiarism and ways to avoid cheating and plagiarism.