Qualitative Research Methods
PhD course

Abstract

This course aims at offering an introduction to qualitative research methods. Participants will learn about the usefulness of qualitative research methods, the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of this type of research, the various approaches and schools of thought, as well as about particular research methods. Finally, the course will also place qualitative approaches and methods within the broader research design, i.e., in the case of engineers, often as a complement to quantitative research. But most of all, the course will help the participants to make progress in the formulation of their problem statement, their research design, qualitative data collection, and analysis of qualitative data.

Course objectives

Even the most quantitative research endeavor will make a minimal use of qualitative research methods, be it only to frame the problem, define the hypotheses, or to analyze complementary qualitative data. In some cases, a PhD will be entirely based on qualitative research methods, something which is not unusual in management research. The purpose of this course is to foster an understanding among the participants that qualitative research is equally important as quantitative research, that qualitative research can be complementary to qualitative research, and that qualitative research must and can be conducted with the same intellectual and methodological rigor as is quantitative research. But most of all, the course is practical in nature, as it will help the participants to apply qualitative research methods to their personal PhD projects.

This is a course aimed at the generic PhD student, even if the portion of qualitative research is limited within his/her PhD. Indeed, qualitative research has solid epistemological and theoretical foundations in philosophy (phenomenology, hermeneutics), is composed of various schools of thought – notably grounded theory, ethnomethodology, etc. –, and leads to very concrete research methods, such as various forms of interviewing, participant observation, focus groups, and many others more. Analysis of qualitative data follows equally rigorous steps and can actually even be quantified. Finally, like quantitative research, qualitative research must follow a coherent research design.
Consequently, the participants may expect the following outcomes from this course:

- Understand the epistemological and theoretical foundations of qualitative research,
- Become knowledgeable about the various qualitative research methods, such as interviews, focus groups, various types of observations, and others,
- Learn how to construct case studies,
- Learn about the analysis/interpretation of qualitative data,
- Apply qualitative research methods to various stages of the participants’ research process, such as problem statement formulation, research design, data collection, and data analysis.

**Pedagogical approach**

Our pedagogical approach is based on adult learning, with a strong focus on the participants. The participants are therefore expected to come to the course with their respective qualitative research problems, regardless of the stage they are in in their PhD process, i.e., formulation of the research question, design of the research steps and the methodology, devising of their precise qualitative methodology or analysis and interpretation of qualitative data.

As part of the first day, we will identify the various contributions of the participants and inbuild them within the course so as to generate value added for all participants in the class.

In order for participants to prepare themselves and in order to optimize the working sessions, participants are invited to read the texts provided. These are introductory texts aimed at providing the participants with the basic concepts and questions related to the different topics.

**Furthermore, and in preparation of the first session, participants are expected to come to the course with the following preparatory work:**

1. A half-page description of their problem-statement for their PhD,
2. A one-page graphic presentation of their research design (if available),
3. A short description of the type of qualitative data collection method (to be) used (if available), and
4. Available qualitative data for analysis and interpretation (e.g., written up cases, synthesized interviews, monographies, biographies) (if available).

Assignments for Blocks 2 and 3 will be individual for each participant and will be defined with the professor during the first and the second blocks.

The course is structured into 3 blocks, namely a first block (October, 11-12, 2017) during which the participants are introduced to the foundations of qualitative research methods; a second block, three weeks later (November, 1-2, 2017), during which the participants learn about qualitative data collection; and a third block (November 29-30, 2017), during which the participants learn how to analyze and interpret qualitative data and link them back to their research/PhD project. In between, the participants will work on their own concrete qualitative research, so as to be able to bring it to the 2nd and 3rd block of sessions. Between the first and the second block, each participant will have a one-hour personal meeting with the professor, so as to discuss the participant’s research plan and related qualitative research activities.
Requirements and Evaluation

Participants are required to prepare themselves for the working sessions by reading the texts provided for that purpose. Participants will be assessed according to their active participation as well as on the basis of a paper they will hand in after the end of the course. This paper counts as the final exam. The paper will be defined individually together with the professor and will be approximately 30 pages long. It will pertain to the particular qualitative research problem of the participant. The paper must be handed in at the latest on January 31st, 2017 midnight (24:00).

There is a reading for each of the three blocks. Participants should read these texts, which are available online on http://moodle.epfl.ch.

Structure of the course

The course is structure into 3 blocks of altogether 6 days (2+2+2), plus at least one hour of personal tutoring between the first and second block. Each block is structured into 6 sessions, two of which are always devoted to participants’ input.

Block 1 (October, 11-12, 2017): the history, context and usefulness of qualitative research
- Session 1.1.: Introduction to qualitative research, overview
- Session 1.2.: The origins of qualitative research
- Session 1.3.: Participants’ input on research questions
- Session 1.4.: Epistemological questions
- Session 1.5.: The different approaches to qualitative research
- Session 1.6.: Participants’ input on research design

One hour of personal tutoring between blocks one and two.

Block 2 (November, 1-2, 2017): data collections and preparation
- Session 2.1.: The different approaches to qualitative research II
- Session 2.2.: Research design
- Session 2.3.: Participants’ input on data collection
- Session 2.4.: Participants’ input on data collection
- Session 2.5.: Data collection methods
- Session 2.6.: Data preparation methods

Block 3 (November 29-30, 2017): analysis and interpretation of qualitative data
- Session 3.1.: Data coding methods
- Session 3.2.: Ethnographic case methods
- Session 3.3.: Participants’ input on data analysis and interpretation
- Session 3.4.: Participants’ input on data analysis and interpretation
- Session 3.5.: Data analysis
- Session 3.6.: Grounded theory methods

Readings
The following readings have been uploaded and should be read by the participants prior to each of the three blocks:

Readings for Block No.1:

Readings for Block No.2:

Readings for Block No.3:


Bibliography


**Websites**

http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-eng.htm
http://kerlins.net/bobbi/research/qualresearch/
http://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/ihcs/rescqr.html
http://www.ufaweb.ualberta.ca/iqqm/
http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/index.html
http://www.coe.uga.edu/leap/qual/index.html
http://www.ualberta.ca/~iqqm/english/engframeset.html
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