

# Research Methods for Economics and Policy

Spring 2025, April-May

Lorenzo Neri

## Learning outcomes

At the end of the course, students will have proved their understanding of the research process. This will include: i) generating and formulating research ideas; ii) conducting a literature review; iii) reading and extracting information from economics papers; iv) finding, collecting, and analyzing data; v) writing an academic paper and effectively presenting the results.

The acquired skill set is a fundamental support for students interested in doing academic research.

By the end of the course, students will be able to set up a research project, gather and process different types of data, and effectively communicate the results.

Students will be able to identify and formulate important and policy-relevant research questions, understand which data sources and methods fit the research question better, and communicate the results effectively.

Students will be able to communicate the set up and results of a research project formally and effectively to both academic and policy-makers. Emphasis will be placed on both academic writing and delivering an academic presentation.

## Administrative information

Lecture time and room: Monday-Wednesday, 9-11, Room S11. April 7th to May 21st. No lectures on April 21-23.

Office hours: by appointment. Please email Lorenzo at [lorenzo.neri@uniroma2.it](mailto:lorenzo.neri@uniroma2.it).

Final grade: THERE IS NO EXAM. The final grade will be awarded as follows:

- Research Proposal (70%); **due May 29th, via email.**
- Attendance/engagement (5%).
- Presentation (10%); week 4.
- Presentation (15%); week 6.

Slides will be uploaded on the course page.

Please if you have any trouble finding a paper, do get in touch and I will send you the pdf.

It is important to start planning and thinking about your research idea well ahead. Please do not hesitate to get in touch and come see me to discuss potential ideas.

There is no textbook. The course will make use of economics papers and ad-hoc material that will be provided by the course coordinator. The full list of papers and resources will be published on the module page.

## **Research Proposal**

The research proposal must be within 5 pages (excluding references), maximum 1.5-spaced. It should be titled, but you do not need to add an abstract at the beginning.

It is important that the research proposed is *feasible*. This means that the data you plan to use must exist, unless you also propose a data collection (see below). If you plan to use this proposal for your dissertation, make sure that the data are also publicly available or that you can reasonably expect to be able to access them, given the dissertation deadlines and other administrative constraints. I am happy to discuss instances where a formal application is needed.

If you already have access to the data by the time you write your proposal, you are free to include exhibits (e.g., maps, summary statistics tables, etc) - as well as other visualisations or exhibits (e.g., diagrams) - that you think may help the discussion. You are allowed 2 pages of Appendix to you include the exhibits; alternatively, you can include them in the main text, making sure you do not exceed the 5 pages. Let me stress that having this in the proposal is *not* compulsory, and a well-made proposal can be awarded the maximum grade even it does not include any exhibit.

**IMPORTANT. YOU DO NOT NEED TO PERFORM ANY ANALYSIS BEYOND WHAT I DESCRIBED ABOVE AND EVEN IF YOU DO, THIS WILL NOT ENTER YOUR FINAL GRADE.**

If you plan to collect data (e.g., via web scraping) you must i) clearly document whether this is feasible (e.g., you cannot propose to scrape a website that does not allow that); ii) carefully describe how you plan to collect such data; iii) describe how the final dataset will look like.

Similarly, if - as part fo your proposal - you plan to carry out a survey or an experiment (physical or online), this must be feasible and any question you plan to ask or experiment you plan to design must pass a potential ethical approval.

Please note that if your proposal includes a Randomised Controlled Trials (RCT), you need to carefully describe the setting, the design, the randomisation protocol, the sample considered, etc - I encourage you to follow pre-registered RCTs for this. Obviously, this will not be actually doable, except in very specific cases. Hence, the description of the design and the data that you plan to collect is particularly important. **If you plan to include a survey, lab or field experiment in your proposal, please do get in touch with me beforehand.**

**Grading.** The proposals should, in general, include the main aspects of research papers that we have covered (with the exclusion, of course, of the results/discussion/conclusion sections). When grading your proposal, beyond the formal aspects above, I will evaluate the writing style (correct grammar, clarity, typos, etc), the accuracy and coverage of the literature review, the clarity and consistency of the arguments (e.g., is the contribution of the research proposal clear?), as well as the clarity and detail of the description of the data and empirical methodology proposed. You are encouraged to think critically and must openly discuss (if applicable) the potential issues you envisage (e.g., internal vs external validity, statistical power).

## **Topic 1. Generating ideas and preparing a literature review**

Lecture 1: generating research ideas and preparing a literature review.

Lecture 2: reading an economics paper.

Papers:

Dynarski, S., Libassi, C. J., Michelmore, K., and Owen, S. (2021). [Closing the gap: The effect of reducing complexity and uncertainty in college pricing on the choices of low-income students](#). *American Economic Review* 111.6: 1721-1756.

Deshpande, M., and Li, Y. (2019). [Who is screened out? Application costs and the targeting of disability programs](#). *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 11(4), 213-248.

Lecture 3: reading an economics paper.

Papers assigned for group work:

Chyn, E. (2018). [Moved to opportunity: The long-run effects of public housing demolition on children](#). *American Economic Review*, 108(10), 3028-3056.

Chetty, R., Hendren, N., & Katz, L. F. (2016). [The effects of exposure to better neighborhoods on children: New evidence from the moving to opportunity experiment](#). *American Economic Review*, 106(4), 855-902.

Draca, M., Machin, S., & Witt, R. (2011). [Panic on the streets of London: Police, crime, and the July 2005 terror attacks](#). *American Economic Review*, 101(5), 2157-2181.

## **Topic 2. Data**

Lecture 4: Data sources.

## **Topic 3. Academic presenting**

Lecture 5: Academic Presenting.

#### **Topic 4. Methods and research credibility**

Lecture 6/7: Research replicability, empirics, research credibility.

#### **Topic 5. Workflow, Code and Data for Social Sciences**

[Code and Data for the Social Sciences: A Practitioner's Guide](#) (Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse M. Shapiro)

#### **Topic 6. Coding sessions**

Module 1: Best practices, organisation of syntax files, etc

Module 2: Exercises on visualisation of results, etc

Module 3: Web-scraping

#### **Topic 7. Academic writing**

##### **Student presentations of published papers (Week 4)**

Please see the guidelines and list of papers on the module page. Pick one and prepare a 20/30-minutes presentation. The presentation must cover the main aspect of the paper in detail. During the presentation, you should discuss:

- Context and background
- Motivation
- Literature and contribution
- Data and methods
- Empirical methodology
- Main results
- Discussion

ONLY for PhD students auditing the module: PhD students attending the module should pick a paper and, in addition to presenting the paper, should prepare a critical evaluation of the paper. You are welcome to pick a paper from the list or an alternative paper that you would like to present. One thing you can consider, and that I recommend, is picking a recent Job Market Paper of a top Job Market candidate from top EU and US institutions. Once you have chosen the paper, please contact me for approval.

Provisional Schedule:

- Tuesday May 6: Bertolini, Briganti, Litterio.
- Wednesday May 7: Mahmoodi, Caserta, Bernat.

**Group and 1-to-1 Meetings (Week 5)**

Module 1: Students discuss their research proposal with their peers.

Module 2: In-class meeting with the lecturer.

Provisional Schedule:

- Wednesday May 14: Bertolini (9.10am), Briganti (9.35am), Litterio (10am), Mahmoodi (10.25am), Bernat (10.50).

**Student presentations of research proposals (Week 6)**

Students present their research proposal. The presentation can be 20-30 minutes and should follow the structure of an academic presentation (except for the results Section, which will not be present).

- Monday May 19th: Bertolini, Briganti, Litterio. After the presentations, there will be time to discuss your research proposal.
- Tuesday May 20th: Mahmoodi, Bernat.
- Wednesday May 21st: **NO CLASS.**