

# Course report

Evaluation of the course 32IFM1, 32LFM1 H18-1 Forskningsmetoder, distans 15 hp / Digital Research Methods, distance course 15 credits BMBD117h, BMDD117h

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*Please note that the main suggested changes in the course are briefly summarized at the end of the report.*

## 1. Content and results

### 1.1 Changes made prior to the start

The course runs every Fall semester. Evaluations and experiences from earlier installments of the course indicated that:

- the qualitative part of the introduction module did not provide a sufficiently broad overview of a variety of methods and the students felt they were only assigned to read the textbooks on general methodology
- many students felt that the main assignment with two papers, each describing a fictitious study, was too much work
- also, many students felt that the fictitious character of the main assignment was unsatisfactory and difficult to “perform”, and the teacher team similarly expressed being unsure of how to assess such designed, rather than actually performed, studies.

Initiatives were therefore taken to:

- arrange a series of short lectures on various methods on campus in Borås for the MADI students in September. The lectures were filmed and made available through pingpong for the DLIS students as well,
- merge the two main papers, one with a quantitative approach and one with a qualitative, into one single paper, preferably opening up for a mixed methods approach,
- change the empirical assignment in the main paper to a real hands-on empirical study, which could also better serve to prepare the students for the upcoming thesis course. Some supervision hours were assigned to Mats Dahlström and Erik Joelsson to accommodate possible students' supervision needs.

### 1.2 Learning outcomes

After passing the course the student should be able to:

*concerning knowledge and understanding*

- account for and categorise foundational research method principles and explain the relation between scholarly problem formulation and research study design

*concerning skills and abilities*

- formulate a scholarly research problem and, using this as basis, suggest and apply one or several appropriate methods
- identify, review and strategically apply research literature relevant to the problem at hand
- apply research methods for data collection and analysis of complex problems
- conduct analyses with basic methods for descriptive and inferential statistics
- account for correlational and uncertainty factors when collecting and analysing data

*concerning professional judgement*

- explain how choice of method and research implementation are conditioned by and correlate with societal phenomena, with regards to e.g. research ethics and making research results publicly available

### **1.3 Coordinators and teachers**

For the 2018 course, Johan Eklund was replaced as the teacher of quantitative methods and statistics by Katarina Michnik and Birgitta Wallin. Also, Jonas Söderholm replaced Gustaf Nelhans to take care of module 3 alongside Helena Francke.

Thus, teachers in the course were Mats Dahlström (module 1-2), Julia Pennlert (module 1), Mikael Gunnarsson (module 1), Jenny Johannisson (module 1), Frances Hultgren (module 1), David Gunnarsson (module 1), Katarina Michnik (module 1), Birgitta Wallin (module 1-2), Jonas Söderholm (module 2-3), Helena Francke (module 3); Rachel Pierce (module 2), Erik Joelsson (module 2), Roger Blomgren (module 2).

### **1.4 Results**

56 students registered for the course, the largest cohort the course has had since it was launched. 3 of these remained inactive throughout the course. 48 students have completed all assignments as per March 4, whereas some 5 students have 1-2 assignments to complete. Of the 48 students having passed the course, 7 from MAD1 received a VG grade for the course, and 7 from DLIS received A or B.

Re-examinations have been provided for all modules and assignments. For all assignments, a further re-examination will be provided late August.

## **2. Evaluation**

A questionnaire was provided in pingpong at the end of the course. Since the course did not have a campus meeting at the end of the course, no IRL face-to-face evaluation conversation was arranged. The questionnaire had 5 responses from the DLIS students and 12 from the MAD1 students.

### **2.1 Questionnaire**

The questionnaire was published Jan 8 2019 with a reminder Jan 21, and closed Feb 11. It contained 11 closed-ended questions and 5 open-ended ones, although the former group had room for voluntary comments as well.

The students seem to be content with the course as a whole. One overall comment:

(i) Overall a good course, apart from stress I enjoyed writing the paper and the draft. I also got useful ideas from the seminars.

The students state that the course met its learning outcomes (14/17 stated "to a fairly large extent"), and that the teaching and forms of teaching (13/16 stated fairly large or very large extent) and examination forms (15/17 stated fairly large or very large extent) contributed to their learning and helped them reach the learning outcomes.

The results were not as positive for some of the specific teaching events arranged. So for instance, the "lecture slam" arranged in September (and afterwards made available as films) received a mixed verdict, with 64 % stating that the lectures helped their learning only to a very small or fairly small degree. Two comments:

(ii) Helpful, but I did not have to go to Borås for them to help with my learning. It also made me slightly fixated on using mixed methods for my research question, and took me some time to realize that not all questions benefit from (or need) mixed methods.

(iii) I watched them all and they were interesting. I did not attend the residential week lectures. My main source of learning has been the course literature, but it was still interesting to watch the lectures, listen to the teachers personal experiences - since this is a distance course it also made the contact with the teachers feel a bit more personal and engaging.

As for the workshop in R, this as well received both praise and criticism, with 68 % stating that it helped their learning to a very small or fairly small degree. Three comments:

(iv) More laborations, hands on lessons with R studio, not so much theory about complex statistics. We need to understand basics before those lessons can be interesting.

(v) It felt as if the teachers assumed we had understood more than we had. This was a very difficult task to deal with from home, and the small, easy things became a hindrance and prevented learning on a greater scale. [...] A filmed tutorial on RStudio is needed at an early stage, where you show us how to use it. A workshop in Borås with exercises is a recommendation, where teachers can support when you get stuck. These small things would most likely have saved me loads of time and frustration.

(vi) It supported the learning objective of being able to "perform analyses with fundamental methods for descriptive and inferential statistics" but it was a challenge to learn, for example, the programme R. Even though the aid we had for the assignment was helpful I didn't feel that I learned the programme well enough to be able to use it myself in the future for analysis. I also thought that the instructions for the assignment was a bit unclear especially how to write the hand-in assignment. For example that you were suppose to include the codes etc. In comparison to a previous course (I think it was informationsökning), where this was very clear.

The draft seminars in November were on the other hand highly appreciated by the students (68 % stating that the seminars helped their learning to a very large or fairly large degree). Two comments:

(vii) The draft paper seminars were really useful. When you got the feedback it made it easier to understand how to think when you are about to write a paper. But I think that for me, another paper seminar near the deadline would be good, just to get another feedback if there is anything that you are wondering.

(viii) paper draft with seminar - var för mig väldigt nyttigt och kändes bra efteråt då jag fick hjälp och inputs till min tanke om vad jag skulle skriva om. Behåll denna form av seminarium!

Unlike in earlier course installments, the course literature was very well received. A new Swedish translation of Bryman's book was published spring 2018 and incorporated in the literature list, which might partly explain the relatively higher degree of satisfaction expressed by the Swedish students compared to previous years. A couple of comments:

(ix) The literature by Bryman and Wildemuth has been very helpful during this course. They both describe different methods in a very clear way and explains with different examples.

(x) The course literature was helpful for basic understanding, but it's also very important to look up your own scholarly articles and chapters in books that is not part of the mandatory literature in order to get more specific and visual examples of how the methods can be applied. I'd actually like to see recorded lectures and drawings showing e.g. how a qualitative content analysis is carried out. Merely reading about it in a textbook may not be enough.

As for work load, several students express negative feelings, most of them pointing to the stressful situation where the module 2 paper assessment is back-to-back with the master thesis course, for which a passed methods course is a requirement. Here are two typical comments:

(xi) I don't think it's wise to have the paper be handed in so late as December 17th because it was a great deal of stress for us in case there would have been need for a re-exam. Maybe you could have the paper be handed in a bit sooner, also this must have been stressful for teachers reading through our papers right after the holidays..?

(xii) Det som har varit stressande är att man var tvungen att bli godkänd på en uppsats som man endast fått kommentarer på som draft. Kanske man kunde ha fått en handledarträff mitt i arbetet, så man slapp vara nervös för att man missförstått någonting/tänkt fel.

## 2.2 Comments and proposed changes

Based on the results, the administration and the evaluation of this year's course as well as on experiences from previous years, it is clear that some earlier identified problems with the course has been resolved, but some are still prevalent. Two main and recurring problems, experienced by both students and teachers, are:

1. the fact that the course runs *back-to-back with the thesis course* poses significant stress for all parties involved (xi and xii). A long-term solution for this would be to move the entire course earlier in the respective programmes (alternatively splitting it into two 7.5 courses, one basic, running in the first or second semester, and one advanced, running in the third semester). This is currently being discussed within the programme groups and might be realized within a couple of years. A short-term

solution would be to set an *earlier deadline for the module 2 paper*, such as late November, and to *move the small qualitative methods assignment to December* (and change it, see below), and specifying that only module 2 and the quantitative part of module 1 (running up to the end of November) are requirements for the thesis course, whereas module 3 and the qualitative part of module 1 (running December and January) are not mandatory requirements for the thesis course. This would allow students and grading teachers more time to manage the module 2 papers and possible re-examinations in due time before the thesis course starts. However this also means redesigning the module 1 qualitative assignment, and it is currently not clear whether there will be time to perform these changes in time for the next course in August 2019.

2. the students' skills and experiences in quantitative methods and statistics when coming to the course are modest, and the distance and development they are expected to overcome during the course to meet the learning outcomes, is felt by the students to be considerable, sometimes overwhelming (iv-vi). On the other hand, this could also be the effect of R Studio being thought of as a difficult and/or an unsatisfactory pedagogical tool/environment (vii), and also that workshops are only conducted online, although some students clearly express a need for hands-on sessions in Borås (v-vi). Regardless, the responsible teachers have expressed an interest in *changing the module in terms of content and tools*.

As for the mini-lecture series on campus, there were mixed reactions (ii-iii). The negative comments came more or less entirely from the DLIS group, who could only make use of the recorded films. The MADi group seems much more positive. And at the end of the campus event, a brief face-to-face evaluation with the MADi group actually attending the lectures (ca 20 students) was very positive. As CC and observer during the event, I can verify that the *lecture sessions worked very well* with engaging and generous lecturers, and with lots of questions and interactivity from the students. For economic reasons, we will re-use the films in 2019 and possibly in 2020, but whenever the next campus and filming occasion is arranged (if there is one), both students and teachers agree that a more informal and 'soft' space than a traditional lecture room could be used.

Module 1 is unsatisfactory - the quantitative part has been commented above, and as for the qualitative part, the examination form (discussion forum) does not work well. As CC, I would recommend changing this somehow, possibly into doing reflections on methodology and theory based on the work the students do in the module 2 paper (thus having the examination later in the course, after the students have handed in their module 2 papers). If possible, it would also be good if the students could make some use of SAGE:s methods course package online with lectures, textbooks and sample journal articles, for such an assignment (available through the university library). Alternatively, the qualitative assignment in module 1 could be skipped all together (its learning outcomes are still examined through module 2), and the 2 credits could then be transferred to module 3 if the students are assigned some work in December to prepare more presentation or texts for the January seminar.

As for module 2, the change to merge the two paper versions into one has proven successful and has certainly alleviated some of the writing burden on the students. The change to turn it into a 'real' empirical study has also been good in the sense that it probably prepares the students better for what is to come in the thesis course, but an unforeseen effect was the significant amount of supervision and support needed by the students (cf comment xii). Although a few hours were

assigned to two teachers to respond to supervising questions and needs from the students, this was far from enough to cover the actual needs. Assigning proper supervisors for students, even in the form of group supervision, will however turn out to be too costly, budget-wise. Nevertheless, some form of *strengthened supervision structure* is needed for upcoming course installments, in the form of additional supervision hours and a more organized and transparent form of supervision.

Module 3 seems to work fine with respect to teaching and examination forms.

So to sum up, the following actions are suggested:

1. move the course earlier in the programme ; or split it into a basic 7.5 (semester 1 or 2) and an advanced 7.5 course (semester 3)
2. set an earlier deadline for the module 2 paper (late November), with an earlier draft seminar (mid-October or even earlier), and a firmer supervision structure
3. change the qualitative assignment in module 1, and place it in December, after the submission of the module 2 paper ; alternatively, skip the assignment, and transfer the work load and the credits to module 3
4. improve the pedagogical situation for the quantitative/statistics parts of module 1