

- Faculté des sciences économiques
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Social Work Research Design: From Ideas to PhD Proposals (5TS2004)

Filières concernées	Nombre d'heures	Validation	Crédits ECTS
Doctorat en travail social	Séminaire: 1 pg	Voir ci-dessous	3

ph=période hebdomadaire, pg=période globale, j=jour, dj=demi-jour, h=heure, min=minute

Période d'enseignement:

- Semestre Automne

Equipe enseignante

Lisa Marie Borrelli, Professor ITTS, UniNe
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S. Cotelli Kureth, Professor, UniNe (sara.cotelli@unine.ch)

Contenu

How to elaborate a PhD project? This is the first key question of this class. How to grasp the gaps in the existing literature on a specific topic? How to consider social work practice relating to the PhD subject? How to formulate a research problem and research goals? Which methodology allows best to find answers to the research questions? How about different techniques for scientific work (e.g. literature review, using AI-tools)? What is specific for social work in terms of participation and research ethics?

The seminar proposes inputs, application of different working tools, communities of practice, and presentation of PhD students and their PhD project. As much as possible PhD students should work and progress on their own project. The seminar is divided into the following parts:

L. M. Borrelli (1st October 2026): The specificity of social work research as an action science asks for a disciplinary bound reflection and it does entail theoretical, conceptual, empirical and professional orientation for the PhD project. As social work builds upon egalitarian collaboration with users and their perspectives, ethical questions of participation are key for research. The session will start with a general brainstorming and in-depth reflection on the "pieces" of a PhD research project (what makes up a research project, what aspects need to be there, how to implement them wisely?). The brainstorming will guide the following sessions and is used as a red thread to which the students can come back to in the years of their PhD.

L. M. Borrelli (2nd October 2026 (1/2 day)): The first half of the day will be dedicated to literature and its quality. Together with all the existing electronic means and programs, literature research becomes a highly complex and delicate issue. A (systematic) literature review and the state of the art for the PhD project are intrinsically connected with the formulation of the research questions and influence significantly the quality of the research design.

S. Rao Dhananka (2nd October 2026 ½ day; 20th October 2026 ½ day):

Both sessions delve into the research design. Special attention is given to the question of internal cohesion, the research design. The aim of this part is to equip the PhD students with methodological knowledge, patterns of thought and concrete application to elaborate their own research design for their PhD study. Research design is the "glue" that holds the theoretical and empirical parts of the research together. It structures the research, builds its coherence and presents a roadmap for its execution. It is an arrangement of conditions that allows to control the variance and to conceive data collection and analysis in a manner that presents a logical basis for countless decisions with adequate feasibility and procedure.

L. M. Borrelli (19th November 2026): This day will be dedicated to theory, write, establishing your own contribution and your position in the field. We will discuss what is new in your work, why do we need it?

Proposal needs to be motivated and show what the value of research is. We will also delve into questions of ethics and power dynamics.

S. Cotelli Kureth (20th October 2026, ½ day):

To close the module, this last half day deals with writing. For academic writing it is important to understand how generative AI tools work. If not used critically, AI tools can be detrimental to learning. In order to enhance critical thinking and analytical skills, it is crucial to be transparent about the strengths, purpose and limitations of AI. It does not replace human thinking but should not be banned. The goal is to develop a culture of trust and academic integrity.

Forme de l'évaluation

Within the module you will:

Submit 1-3 A4 pages until the 15.12.2026:

- graphically representing the (potential) research design

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- situating the research question in a possible theoretical framework, or at least in a body of literature
- indicating the constants, the variables / the cases
- discussing the type of control and the comparative axis
- arguing the pertinence of the research design for the research question, based on the quality criteria
- discussing potential biases
- indicating potential data-gathering methods

You will further be asked to actively participate in the classes and work with your PhD project, preparing potential readings and contribute to exercises.

Exams and retake exams are organized by the ITTS. The relevant procedures will be explained in class or communicated separately where necessary.

Modalités de rattrapage

In case this course needs to be retaken, the submission (see above) will need to be redone, and an additional written assignment will be given (suited to the seminar), of about 5 pages.

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Documentation

All the documentation will be available on Moodle.

Pré-requis

Registration as a PhD student at the ITTS, a Swiss university or as auditor in the perspective of being a future PhD student of the ITTS. Registration at messagerie.itts@unine.ch until 20 September 2026.

Forme de l'enseignement

Presentations, discussions, groupwork, guided reflection to directly apply lessons to your own project.

Teaching periods

- Thursday 01.10.2026; 09:15 – 17:15
- Friday 02.10.2026; 09:15 – 17:15
- Thursday 19.11.2026; 09:15 – 17:15
- Friday 20.11.2026; 09:15 – 17:15

Venue

Room C43, Av. du Premier-Mars 26

Objectifs d'apprentissage

Au terme de la formation l'étudiant-e doit être capable de :

- Select an appropriate empirical field and research method aligned with the research question (initial)
- Write a literature review
- Develop a preliminary comprehensive research design for the PhD project
- Use generative AI tools while adhering to academic integrity standards and ethical use
- Formulate research problems and questions
- Develop comprehensive literature research

Compétences transférables

- Integrate theoretical frameworks with empirical research design in a coherent manner
- Choose an empirical field and research methods aligned with the research question