Co-Ordinating Lecturer: Professor Ronald G. SULTANA
Value of study unit: 5 ECTS
Mode of Teaching: Group seminars, case studies.
Mode of Assessment: Paper

Course Outline: This unit provides training and dissertation support in the methods, concepts and skills required for research in education of a comparative and international nature. Comparative research draws eclectically from a wide variety of research methods, since it is itself multi-disciplinary in nature. Depending on their previous research experience and strengths in particular fields of study, as well as on the specific focus of the dissertation to be submitted at the end of the Masters course, students may draw on one or more of the following research approaches: anthropological, ethnographic, qualitative, quantitative survey methods, case-study methods, historical analysis, analysis of country data sets (e.g. those produced by the OECD), and so on. Irrespective of the methodology or methodologies used, and independent of whether the key focus is analytical, descriptive, evaluative or exploratory, participants will need to keep in mind the main aspiration for this course, namely that, in comparing and contrasting educational phenomena, perceived as culturally-embedded social practices, one ends up understanding one’s own context better, as well as being better positioned to imagine alternatives. The course will therefore introduce students to the relevant literature and contemporary research and, given both the local context and its geographical position, special attention will be given to work relating to small states and developing and intermediately developed countries. Ways of dealing with comparative and international research are considered from both practical and theoretical perspectives.

Select Suggested Readings:


**Specialised journal:** *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education (QSE)* – Back issues available from my office [over 300 articles from QSE available from the UoM Ebsco search facilities].

**Key textbooks:**


Students are also required to read at least one book reporting research carried out using qualitative methodology, preferably based on ethnography.

**SPECIFIC SESSIONS**

**Topic 1: Introducing qualitative research: epistemology and traditions**
This session focuses on introducing the origins, history and development of qualitative research. In particular, it addresses the philosophical underpinnings of the different approaches to qualitative research, and discusses the epistemological premises and challenges, particularly in relation to the positivist, post-positivist, and range of interpretive stances adopted by qualitative researchers. The session then provides a general overview of the key approaches that can be broadly referred to as ‘qualitative’, including: ethnography, grounded theory, interviewing (including focus group interviews), participant observation, case studies, ethnomethodology, life history, action research, and narrative inquiry. A special focus is placed on the place of qualitative research in comparative education. Finally, ethical issues specific to qualitative research are addressed.

**Readings:**
**Topic 2: Interviewing**

Individual, group and focus interviews are among the most common strategies used in the qualitative research and fieldwork tradition. They are also one of the most often used tools in educational research, with structured, semi-structured or unstructured ‘conversations’ being carried out with one or more of a variety of actors that can include teachers, pupils, school and education system administrators, and other ‘stakeholders’ such as parents, employers, trade union officials, and so on. The qualities that are required to carry out a successful interview are often under-rated, particularly since the focus tends to be narrowly on ‘technical’ skills, with little attention given to the personal characteristics—as well as ethical dimensions—that are critical in the encounter with the ‘other’. Different forms of interviews are analysed, and specific issues related to interviews with particular groups of persons—including children, for instance, or officials in powerful positions—are raised.

**Readings:**

**Topic 3: The focus group interview**

Focus groups are widely used in educational research, providing interviewers with a distinct opportunity to collect data efficiently by addressing time and space constraints. Focus groups can also have several other distinct advantages, including providing safer and more congenial environments for individuals to express their views, and also to sharpen their perspectives through the synergy created in critically debating with others. This session explores some of the key characteristics of the successful focus group interview, addressing such procedural and practical issues as the selection of focus group members, the facilitation of focus group discussion, and the analysing of focus group transcripts. It will also consider the politics underpinning focus group interviews, with their potential of decentring the role of the researcher, and the democratisation of the research process.

**Readings:**

**Topic 4: Multi-site ethnography**
Multi-site (or multi-local) fieldwork is increasingly practiced in a range of disciplines, such as anthropology and education. This trend that has been spurred by, among other things, the need to demystify and 'ground' globalization. In this session we will consider how such multi-sited ethnography differs from the more traditional single-site research. We will also consider the challenges that arise not only in relation to technical and procedural considerations (such as the selection of sites, the nature of the relationships with informants in such fields, and the dominant types of data generated), but also in relation to the epistemological claims that can be made.

**Readings:**

**Topic 5: Action Research**
This session sets out by distinguishing between academic research of the traditional kind and action research, exploring the philosophy which underpins action research in education. It then critically examines the most frequently presented models in the research literature as well as the methodologies which have been most successfully used in educational research carried out over the last few decades. Finally, an attempt is made to focus the discussion on the possibilities of action research as a tool in comparative education studies.

**Readings:**

Session 6: Ethnographic Observation of schools and classrooms
During the session, classroom observation as a means of data collection will be analysed in depth by considering:
- Various forms of observation (anecdotal records; time-sampling; event-sampling)
- Ways in which observation can help practitioners and researchers improve their understanding of children’s needs
- Advantages and limitations of observation as a research tool
- Observation skills which individuals need to nurture/develop
- Issues to consider for successful management of observations (physical setting; roles and relationships; ethical issues)

Readings:

Session 7: Grounded Theory
Glaser and Strauss developed their grounded theory strategy in the 1960’s, when qualitative research was still trying to establish legitimacy and credibility in a largely positivist environment. Indeed, much of its initial appeal lay in the attempt of the authors to develop a systematic, ‘scientific’ approach to qualitative data collection and analysis. Despite the ‘narrative turn’ in qualitative research, grounded theorizing strategies have survived several critiques and proved their worth in several areas of study, education included. This session sets out to describe the key aspects of grounded theory, including theoretical sensitivity, theoretical sampling, coding, constant comparative methods, and memoing. It considers the case for and against grounded theory, revisiting some of the issues raised in relation to positivist and post-positivist epistemologies that were made in the introductory session. Finally, the key techniques associated with grounded theory are described, with reference made to their use in Maltese educational research.

Readings:
Session 8: Narrative Inquiry  
(with Dr Simone Galea)
Narrative inquiry has become an increasingly important research method in educational contexts particularly in exploring the lives of teachers and one’s own personal and professional development as a teacher. The methodological principles of narrative research in education are deeply grounded in a political endeavour to enhance the voices of those who are not heard and to create spaces for the production of subjugated knowledges and knowledge communities. The politics of narrative is reflected in the various aspects of the research process; the collection of stories, their formation as well as their presentation and representation.

During the session we shall discuss the issues above and raise questions regarding the production of knowledge through narrative educational research. How do personal experiences and autobiographical accounts become a valid source of knowledge? What are the issues related to life’s presentation as text? What are the ethical responsibilities of the researcher in dealing with stories of others? What is the relation between the creation of narrative and the creation of selves? In discussing the last question we shall touch upon the use of Foucauldian genealogies as specific forms of narrative inquiry in which the descriptive, fictive and critical elements of narrative are brought together to highlight the possible formations and transformations of our subjectivities as teachers and learners.

Readings:

Topic 9: IT software and Qualitative Research  
(with Dr Paul Bartolo)
This practical, workshop session will help students appreciate the usefulness of software like NUDIST in the coding and analysis of qualitative data. The advantages and disadvantages of the use of such software is discussed, with reference being made to research projects that have
**Readings:**

**Session 10: Thinking through the Qualitative Research process**
This session aims to give help students plan for their dissertation project. Students who have successfully completed their MA dissertation will be invited to a panel with a view to sharing their experience of the research process, the challenges encountered, and how these were overcome.