

SV9108 Philosophy of Science Course Feedback Summary 2025

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3 Course Assistants

Philosophy of science is required for all PhD students in the Faculty of Social Sciences. The decision to keep it as a Faculty level course rather than have separate disciplinary courses is regularly revisited and it has been unanimously agreed that the long-term benefits of exposure to different philosophical concerns in different disciplines far outweighs the challenges of bringing together a group with diverse backgrounds and needs from the course. Attendance is mandatory. It is a challenging course to teach because the pre-existing knowledge students come in with and their sense of relevance to their own projects varies widely. Correspondingly, student experience of the course is highly variable although course improvements implemented in the last five years have significantly reduced these problems. The course was offered in person only. In 2025 three teaching assistants with past experience of the course were hired and significantly helped to keep students connected to the course were hired to help facilitate small groups.

Feedback for this course was solicited by two main mechanisms. First, during small group discussions wherein students could more freely express things they did not understand or felt frustrated by during course sessions. These took place throughout the week with both instructors and teaching assistants. The lecturers made an attempt to respond to this form of informal feedback during the course itself by adjusting content and teaching style. Second, by a standard survey sent to all students at the end of the teaching week. A total of 24 students answered the anonymous evaluation out of an enrolment of 54 so the remarks do not capture a representative sample. In addition, a number of students gave informal feedback through emails and in person during the course; these latter remarks were overwhelmingly positive.

Professors Torsvik and Nightingale and the course assistants were widely complimented by students for their passion, engagement, and ability to help students engage with what are difficult concepts. The group work was widely appreciated and the opportunities to debate the course materials with their peers stands out again as one of the best aspects of the course. The decision some years ago to put students in small groups with people from their own disciplines was remarked upon as particularly appreciated. At the same time, the ability to Friday morning to choose which topic to discuss with students from across the course was also seen as fitting ending.

In general, the comments on the survey were positive, with some who did not like the course, which is typical for low response rates and the diversity within the course. There were no students this year who expressed complete dissatisfaction, rather they found elements of the course either difficult to connect to or needing improvement. The feedback is more positive than in any previous year. The other forms of feedback tended to be overwhelmingly positive expressing new insights and inspiration gained from the course.

The survey shows that a large majority of the students felt the course met the learning outcome goals, that they gained an ability to understand their own philosophical positions, and were able to see how it connected to their own research. It also shows that the group work and the lectures were scored more or less the same, although in the comments, the value of the group work is most frequently remarked upon. The vast majority found the level of difficulty to be appropriate, if demanding. Students continue to feel the reading is too extensive although the list has been reduced to 1 or 2 readings per lecture. This problem appears to be related to students believing they need to read everything on the reading list, despite repeatedly being informed in the Course Handbook, in writing (emails), on Canvas, in person and on written materials that only those labelled required are mandatory. Enough students have appreciated the recommended readings that the list will continue to have both.

Informal feedback was enthusiastic with numerous students remarking on how transformative the course was to their PhD projects and thinking. Many expressed how they found it inspiring and useful and if anything, would have liked more time for debate. The overall atmosphere in the lecture hall and small groups was up-beat and dynamic. The vast majority of students were positively engaged. In the written feedback, responses were quite positive although there were some who were unhappy with readings, particular lectures (with no trend in terms of which lectures were dissatisfying), organisation or the demands of the course.

Improvements to be made:

This year students were given a choice of readings for one topic (constructivism) from three different disciplines with a short description of their contents so they could make good decisions about what to read. This was positively received and will be implemented for more topics on the reading list next year.

There is a need to ensure that course information is accessible and understandable to all students. It is unclear what the solution is since multiple channels of information dissemination are used both before and during the course. Next year we will try to streamline the handbook and do some research on the best way to communicate the need to engage the materials carefully.

A process has been engaged in at the Faculty level to further improve the contents of the course which will be implemented for 2026 including a more extensive reading guide.