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1 Introducing Research

The research process

Research is all around us. Barely a week goes by when we don’t read or hear about studies that researchers are undertaking. We learn about medical and scientific breakthroughs. We read about worldwide as well as local solutions to contemporary concerns and issues, and we are informed of the results of opinion polls and market research. For example, we know from research that some kinds of ‘thinking’ activities delay the onset of Alzheimer’s disease. We also know, as a result of scientific developments and medical research, that confirmation of paternity is much easier today than it was a few decades ago. Sometimes research is carried out when a person or organization is searching for a new approach. Sometimes the researcher is sceptical of the available knowledge; there may be conflicting evidence or no information available. Researchers who carry out all these types of work are undertaking an important role in contemporary life. The point to note is the way they go about making their discoveries; it is not haphazard and the discoveries are not brought about simply through flashes of inspiration (Gray, 2004). Researchers use highly structured processes to produce new knowledge (Carter, Kelly and Brailsford, 2012).

Albeit on a smaller scale, you will also be doing research in a disciplined way to find out something about the world in which we live. Whatever your research goal, when the time comes to carry out the research, you will be following a series of conventions. You might be interested in understanding something or some people, and in fathoming out what is going on. You might be focused on analyzing a puzzle and finding a solution. You might be more interested in theorizing and in explaining things in a new way. You might want to change and improve a situation. You might want to evaluate an intervention. Or you might want to explore differences in events over time or through precise experimentation. Irrespective of your research intention, once you enrol in a research course or programme you will need
to comply with the ‘research way of knowing’. Academic research is an organized, systematic, logical and rigorous process of inquiry (Crotty, 1998; Denscombe, 2003).

Your research will demonstrate a disciplined approach to answering the questions that you pose. It will involve thinking, planning and organizing. It will take you to the literature on your topic. It will see you gathering and analyzing data. It will involve you in offering explanations of what you have discovered. It will see you putting forward an argument, threaded through the chapters and/or sections of the written work you produce at the end of the process. The research process will, if carefully carried out, guarantee that your findings will be taken seriously.

Research at the postgraduate level is a long and complex activity, becoming even more complex as you proceed along the academic path (Burton and Steane, 2005). It involves a lot of questioning and requires an element of risk-taking. You will either make the discoveries you expect or you won’t. In fact, you might make a discovery that is different from the one you expected. Don’t be concerned about this. If you follow the conventional process, your anticipated (and unanticipated) discoveries will contribute to new knowledge. The process is not necessarily always straightforward, of course. Research is never absolutely cut-and-dried. There are many decisions to make and there are often unexpected problems to solve along the way. Research can never provide a final answer, but good research can offer us the best available understanding and explanation of an aspect of our world at this moment in time.

INSIGHTS FROM A POSTGRADUATE RESEARCHER

“The research process taught me much. At times it was extremely difficult. At other times it was a source of great satisfaction. I regularly doubted my ability to complete the task, whether I had gathered any data at all, and if I did have data, would it mean anything? Irrespective of having been warned this could be the case when I first started the research, I believe you always feel that it will happen to someone else and not you. But these feelings are part and parcel of the research process.”

Be assured that at this stage no-one expects you to be completely familiar with the process. After all, your enrolment in a research programme of study is considered a research apprenticeship (Felton, 2008). As an apprentice, with supervisors’ guidance, you get to participate in new experiences over a sustained period of time, giving your attention to learning about something from a new perspective (Wisker, 2007). Unlike courses you have done previously, where the planning and focus of attention was already
established for you, in a research programme of study you get to call the shots. You take control of the project, conceptualizing it, customizing its design, shaping its development and setting its boundaries. Like an artist with a blank canvas, you build up from solid and reliable foundational knowledge and, with the new insights developed in the process of your work, you produce a project that is unique to you. In taking the initiative you put your particular stamp on your project.

Of course your personal stamp must not stray from the conventions of research. You will need to demonstrate that you have mastered those conventions in the report that you produce at the end of your research course. Irrespective of whether the report consists of a thesis, a project report, a dissertation, published articles or a series of shorter papers, the requirement is for a carefully planned and systematic piece of inquiry. In particular, you will need to show that you are able to conceptualize and design the study and undertake the data collection and analysis. You will need to demonstrate a sound understanding of the literature and the wider context of knowledge within which the work is embedded. Moreover, you will need to provide evidence of a critical and scholarly argument that is communicated clearly and coherently. Through all these aspects you will become the quintessential independent learner and, in the process, your skills and development and competency as a researcher will be enhanced (Scott and Usher, 2003).

**INSIGHTS FROM A POSTGRADUATE RESEARCHER**

"My research was indeed a voyage of discovery and the benefits of study are huge. Your brain starts working again and you become more passionate about learning and about your topic area."

**What makes academic research distinctive**

Much of the research we engage with in everyday life is focused on finding out facts. For example, researchers wanting to know how often women in their 20s use mobile phones would gather data on relevant aspects of phone usage. Along the way, they might find out some interesting facts. However, the research cannot explain to them why young women use mobile phones in the way they do. The research can describe the data but it cannot offer explanations of the data. Research data, by themselves, are simply facts. Theses, dissertations or small research projects must do something more than describe, which is a rather modest objective. They must, instead, analyze, explain, consider in the light of prior theory, test hypotheses, draw conclusions, generalize to other situations, explore limits to such generalizations, or contribute to theory development (Bernath and Vidal, 2007).
Within academic research it is possible to make sense of what might be happening in the data. We can test a hunch as well as build explanations of the data. From those explanations it is possible to predict and plan for the future. Academic research does this by connecting the data to a theory. Theories allow researchers to develop a set of propositions that explain why things happen as they do. For example, a researcher interested in staff dynamics might want to know why some employees in one department of a workplace demonstrate a greater commitment to their work than do employees from another department in the same workplace. A theory involving the category of ‘communities of practice’ might be invoked to frame the study (Lantolf, 2004). Relevant concepts and their interrelationships from the chosen theory will be used to organize and analyze the data and, as a result, the researcher will be able to draw a number of conclusions about employees’ commitment to their work.

Perhaps, an academic researcher is interested in why children from some ethnic minority groups achieve significantly higher in cognitive tasks than children from other ethnic minority groups in the same school. The researcher might speculate that home practices, expectations, values and norms play a critical role in a child’s cognitive development. The researcher will collect appropriate and relevant data from the home setting to enable the chosen factors to be explored. From the analysis the researcher will be able to test the theory initially proposed. When the theory is found to offer a credible explanation of differential cognitive achievement then the research makes a contribution to our understanding and, in this case, may become an important informer of policy and social planning.

In academic research, data and theory are truly interdependent (Bernath and Vidal, 2007). Whether the theory or the data come first in the process, their interdependence allows both data and theory to become meaningful and offer explanatory power. By themselves, neither theory nor data are particularly useful to research. Research that provides a theory but no data is speculation. In the research relating to cognitive difference amongst minority groups, unless the researcher is able to support the theory with a dataset, then the theory would simply be a guess or a hunch. That is not to ignore the fact that the theory might undergo some refinement during the research process. However, it does emphasize the interdependence of data and theory in academic research.

Similarly, research that provides data without theory simply reports on data collection. In the workplace example, the researcher might gather interesting data on the numbers and kinds of employees committed to their work, but unless the data are theorized, the researcher is not in a position to explain the employees’ commitment to work. The report produced is likely to read more like a technical report than a contribution to the literature.
The technical report may well expertly describe the workplace environment but unless it explains the data it will leave little mark on business studies literature. In academic research the goal is to go beyond mere description. Academic researchers aim for careful analyses to enable them to explain what they have found in their research. The activity of linking a dataset and a theory together is how academic research achieves that goal.

**Core research concepts**

Anyone embarking on a new activity is introduced to new terminology. Take, for instance, children learning to play rugby at school. Initially the coach will talk in a language that seems unclear to the children but, as their experience with the sport grows, terms relevant to the game such as ‘tackle’, ‘drop goal’ and ‘forward pass’ will begin to take on the meaning that is shared by rugby players, supporters and officials. The same experience is likely to happen for new researchers. Experienced researchers have their own vocabulary. You may not have come across some of the terms before. Others, such as ‘sample’, might be familiar, but the research meaning might be new to you. And, as you might expect in a book for novice researchers, you will find a glossary of terms at the end of the book.

**Activity**

**KEY RESEARCH TERMS**

Consider the key research terms listed in the glossary at the end of the book.

1. Check the terms that are unfamiliar to you.
2. Start a file of your own glossary as you come across new terms in your reading.
3. Build up your glossary during the course of your research.

**Steps involved in the early stages of research**

Now that you have determined what practical steps you need to take to prepare successfully for the adventure ahead, it’s time we looked at the academic requirements relating to the early stages of a research undertaking. Some of the steps might involve you in planning for primary research in which you directly explore your area of interest through methods such as observation, interviewing, and experimentation. Other steps might involve you in planning for secondary research in which you explore your area of interest through the literature, reports, archival records and so forth.
1. Planning and conceptualizing the research

Finding the topic

If you want to understand things better then you need to map out a well-defined, bounded topic that is both researchable and significant. The topic will need to be appropriate and manageable for your research course. For example, if you are an honours student then your topic will be much more contained than that of a doctoral student who is interested in the same area. More than likely, the course work you have already undertaken and your wider experiences will have pointed you towards an area that you would like to pursue. Even so, many postgraduate researchers find that firming up on the topic takes longer than expected. During the process of identifying the topic, postgraduate researchers typically want to investigate something that is too broad in scope, or involves participants to whom they are not likely to gain access, or involves resources (especially the resource of time) that are simply not available.

Developing research questions

The way of developing new knowledge within research is to pose questions and then attempt to answer them. The research questions you develop represent what you are trying to find out. Every research purpose requires a different kind of research question. What is going on? What is the solution? How can this be explained more clearly? How can this be improved? How effective is this? Each kind of question provides a focus and a guide for your research activity. Research can deal with questions that are open and exploratory since answers can be found, but it cannot deal with moral questions or questions relating to aesthetics. Good research questions reduce your area of interest to something more manageable and limited in scope. For these reasons, formulating good research questions is a key skill you need to develop.

Understanding the relevant literature

The focus of your work will not have emerged in a vacuum. Reading and thinking about the literature in relation to your topic are critical stages in the planning of your research. Coming to terms with the discussions and debates in your topic area will allow the focus of your study to emerge. Reading about findings from past research allows you to understand what has already been said and done in your chosen area of interest. Engaging with past work will enable you to make connections between your proposed focus and the existing debates in the field. In understanding the relevant literature you will become familiar with the figures of authority in the field, the landmark studies, the typical methodologies and theories, and where your topic fits into the broader picture.
Introducing Research

Synthesizing the literature to create a need for your study

As you read more of the academic and professional literature you will begin to get a sense of the various conversations taking place. When you start to synthesize those conversations, a number of gaps and alternative approaches to doing things will open up in your thinking. The process allows you to see how you might fill a gap or offer another approach to the literature. Synthesizing the literature is a critical step for the development of a rationale for your study. The need for your study will become clear as you work out comparisons and contrasts between your proposed work and the work documented in the literature. Crucially, when you synthesize the literature with care, you will be able to see where you might be able to make a contribution.

2. Designing the research

Clarifying the research design

The design of your research establishes the practical plan for your study. It is systematic and logical and will be chosen to suit the purpose of your research. Different purposes require different kinds of research questions and these, in turn, initiate different research designs. When the fit between the purpose, the questions and design is good, your research will hold together well. The design will provide a coherent plan for undertaking the research. It will demonstrate a conceptual integrity between the purpose of your research and your decisions concerning the information and data needed, the ways in which you will collect and analyze the data (the research methods), the numbers and kinds of participants in your study, and how you will report the findings.

Specifying the data collection methods

The research design you choose will guide you towards a possible dataset for answering your research questions. Your data collection methods will depend on what you want to find out and who and where you want to find it out from. Context does matter. Quantitative methods are used to gather measurable data and qualitative methods are used to collect and explain descriptions of human behaviour. Survey (Rosier, 1988), interview (Gillham, 2000) and observation (Adler and Adler, 1994) are sometimes used, as are non-obtrusive data collection methods such as collecting from archival records, the internet, newspapers, magazines and artefacts. Data tools, which assist with the data collection, include questionnaires, focus groups, field notes, tests, observation checklists and records, interview schedules, written, audio and video recordings, journals and portfolios (Holly, 1997; Hurst, Wilson and Cramer, 1998; Jones, 2001; Ortlipp, 2008). When you are making data collection decisions, keep in mind the scale of the project and the material resources and time you have available.
Specifying the data analysis methods

When the dataset has been collected, you will need to sort, organize, process, code and analyze it. Electronic processing, such as spreadsheets and statistical software, makes this task easier. Just as data collection is a requirement of an empirical study, so too, is data analysis, principally because the analysis connects your data with your conclusions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Willig, 2012). The decisions you make about how you will analyze your data will influence the decisions you make about what data you will collect – and not the other way around. Many postgraduate researchers overlook that important fact but, if you keep the point foremost in your mind, then you may feel less overwhelmed by the data. Applying systematic analytical methods will enable you to produce sound results and findings, and will help instil confidence in the conclusions you draw.

3. Preparing the research proposal

Outlining the background to the research

A research proposal provides a plan that outlines how you intend to conduct your research. In the proposal you identify what issue you intend to investigate, how you will go about addressing the issue, what we will learn from the study, and why you consider it is important to carry it out. In outlining the background you provide a context to the study, letting the reader know something about the topic, what has already been discovered about it, and why you are interested in pursuing it further. If your interest stems from purely personal reasons, you might want to locate yourself within the study by clarifying your personal background and knowledge in relation to the area of work. You then lead into a clear statement of the purpose of the study, explaining your overall aim and objectives and outlining the questions that will guide the research.

Clarifying the literature to create a need for the study

Proposals need a well-planned literature review which is usually reasonably extensive. The research proposal reports on what is known in your area by focusing on what has been done before. In the literature review you summarize published articles, records and documents, synthesize the literature base and offer a critique. The synthesis is intended to highlight major shortfalls or a ‘gap’ in the current knowledge base and offer a rationale for your proposed research. In the proposal you develop an argument or make a case for your intended research, establishing why you deem it necessary to conduct the proposed investigation and what your study will contribute to the research community.
Outlining the research methods

The methodology section discusses in detail how you will collect, analyze and present the data from the research. The choice of methods should be appropriate to the research questions. This section will clarify the research design. It will describe, in detail, the tools you will use to gather data, who will take part in the study (if appropriate), how you will select those people, when and where the research will be conducted, and how you will gain access to the site. It will discuss the methodological literature in relation to your research focus and the criteria you employed to make your methodological decisions. Your discussion will justify why your methods are feasible and appropriate as a means of answering your research question. It will also explain how you intend to organize and analyze the data collected.

Box 1.1 captures the early stages in research, showing the stages as following in orderly progression. Experienced researchers will be quick to point out that, although the depiction of sequential order is reasonably close, the stages do often overlap. For example, you might determine your topic early on, but the more you read of the literature the less convinced you are that the topic is precisely what you want to research.

<table>
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<td>1. Planning and conceptualizing the research</td>
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<td>2. Designing the research</td>
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<td>- Clarifying the participants and location</td>
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<td>- Specifying the data collection methods</td>
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<td>- Specifying the data analysis methods</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Preparing the research proposal</td>
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<td>- Outlining the background to the research</td>
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<td>- Clarifying the literature to demonstrate a need for the research</td>
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<td>- Outlining the research methods</td>
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Preparing yourself for research

Demonstrating independence and initiative is part of the job specification for anyone undertaking research. Your research programme is not likely to supply you with a detailed curriculum. At the postgraduate level, you will be the person who is ultimately held responsible for the work. Consider the
enhanced responsibility over your own learning as a privilege. At what other times in your life as a learner in an educational institution have you had the opportunity to take so much control over your learning? How often before have you been encouraged to follow your own interests and passions? When has anyone previously given you licence to be creative and inventive? Chances are, the answer to all these questions is either ‘not often’ or ‘never’.

There are certainly a number of positives about doing research. However, there are also a number of challenges.

**INSIGHTS FROM A POSTGRADUATE RESEARCHER**

“Undertaking research is not for the faint hearted. It requires focus, dedication, hard work and more time than is possible in any one day. It also requires a little bit of masochism as researchers tend to put themselves under more pressure than any sane person would. However, there are positive spin-offs, not the least of which is the feeling of success – and relief – you have when it all comes together and you finally reach that lofty summit.”

There is certainly a lot of hard work ahead, and you need to prepare yourself for that, but you can begin by setting yourself up for the journey. Prepare your workspace. Perhaps more importantly, clear your workspace of irrelevant material. Check out how you are expected to present your work on paper – font, size, margins, line spacing and so forth – and set up templates on your computer accordingly. Be sure to date each document to avoid any confusion with your last update. If you prefer to read hard copies of publications, consider organizing the publications within a manila folder according to theme. Buy yourself any necessary stationery and think about purchasing a diary or journal to keep track of ideas and/or events. Keep a notebook beside your bed to jot down all those inspirations and solution pathways which will appear out of nowhere in the middle of the night.

Take advantage of any workshops your university offers to postgraduate researchers. Enjoy the intellectual stimulation your peers offer (Flores and Nerad, 2012). Some postgraduate researchers agree to meet informally at regular intervals over coffee or breakfast. If you are an international postgraduate researcher you may have access to support and friendship from a cohort of international postgraduate researchers (Ingleton and Cadman, 2002). In addition, consider setting up an arrangement for a critical friend (Costa and Kallick, 1993), someone who is willing to act as a sounding board for your ideas. Since friends can influence your chances of succeeding, stay clear of relationships that create ongoing tension for you. Avoid conflict situations and reap the benefits of the support you do receive, sometimes from unexpected sources. This support will keep you focused during the rough patches of your study.
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