POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH IN BUSINESS A Critical Guide Sarah Quinton and Teresa Smallbone



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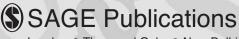


Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of Stuart Rooks who inspired and enormously encouraged us in our teaching and writing. It is also for our children Edmund, Olivia, Aidan and Ella with love.

SAGE Study Skills

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London • Thousand Oaks • New Delhi

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First published 2006

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SAGE Publications Ltd 1 Oliver's Yard 55 City Road London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc. 2455 Teller Road Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd B-42, Panchsheel Enclave Post Box 4109 New Delhi 110 017

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-10 1-4129-0835-3	ISBN-13 978-1-4129-0835-1
ISBN-10 1-4129-0836-1	ISBN-13 978-1-4129-0836-8 (pbk)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2005931794

Typeset by C&M Digitals (P) Ltd., Chennai, India Printed in Great Britain by The Cromwell Press Ltd, Trowbridge, Wiltshire Printed on paper from sustainable resources

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the many people who have helped us in writing this book, in particular, our editor Patrick Brindle for his patience and support, and our colleagues at Oxford Brookes Business School, especially Sally Harridge-March and Jackie Clarke. Emma Coles from the Business School resource centre provided invaluable help with the production of the manuscript and the design of the artwork. Niall O' Dochartaigh gave us permission to use his work on the reliability of internet sources and we are grateful to him. We would also like to thank Chris Blackburn and Mark Saunders for their encouragement to write this book and our many students, particularly on the Oxford Brookes MSc in International Management and the Named Awards, who have contributed to our learning about what makes a good researcher. Chris Peach and Janis Millers, both former students, have allowed us to use some of their work.

About this Book

Who Is It For?

This book is for all Masters' students, including MBA and DMS students, in business and business-related subjects, who are about to embark on some research or to write a dissertation. We also think that PhD students will find a lot of it very helpful. Supervisors of research may also find it a useful tool for helping their students to unravel the mysteries of research.

The book is the culmination of many years' experience of teaching and supervising business and management students. It includes much material that we have developed as teaching aids to help communicate the concept of 'good' research and the processes required to make research 'good'. We discovered while teaching research methods and supervising dissertations that many textbooks offer guidance on research, but that they assume a level of knowledge and use terminology that is really intimidating to novice researchers. The aim of this book is to support you, the researcher, in thinking about, creating, developing, researching and writing up your research project or dissertation successfully. Becoming an active researcher can be rather like becoming a member of a club where there is an unwritten code of how members should dress and behave. This book offers you the key to that 'members' information.

What Does It Do?

This is a practical 'how to' guide – we tell you what you need to know in order to pass your dissertation. Not only is there practical advice, but we also offer some of the academic theory you will need. You can find plenty of help in the research methods textbooks on how to write a questionnaire or run a focus group and so these aspects of data collection are not covered here. Instead, we concentrate on how you can make sure that you can demonstrate that you have come up with the right sort of topic, read the right academic literature 'critically', reflected on the research process and met the many other assessment criteria demanded of Masters'-level business students.

The book tells you how to get started on your project and what you need to know in order to pitch it at the right level – and how to find ideas for what is probably going to be the biggest single piece of academic work you will ever do. It provides a map to help you think about and carry out good quality management research. It guides you through the process of finding ideas for research topics, particularly with dissertations

in mind. It suggests useful tools and techniques for making your research project manageable and achievable, and helps you to find a means of tracking down, assessing and evaluating information, drawing valid conclusions from it and writing it up. We aim to enable you to bridge the gap between theory and practice, so that you are able to show that you are aware that there are a variety of approaches to the construction of knowledge, even if you then choose to follow one particular path.

How to Use this Book

This book is not intended to replace the many established research methods textbooks; rather we feel that it should be used as a core component of your reading to help you tackle the difficult issues – meeting the requirements of your course and examiners as well as delivering satisfying and useful research outcomes. You can access the more specialized books in your institution's library to find out about specific tools and techniques. The book can be read from cover to cover, but it will be equally beneficial to you if you read chapters as and when you need them. You will find discussion questions and suggested further reading at the end of each chapter, use these to consolidate your knowledge and improve your research skills.

Chapters 1 and 2 help you to understand what exactly management research is all about and make you aware of current debates in both the academic and the business world about the nature and relevance of research in this area. They then go on to help you to understand why, in order to satisfy the academic requirements of a Masters' degree, you have to develop a critical approach to the subject and how you can go about it. Chapter 3 offers lots of practical help in finding and developing good ideas for dissertation and research projects that will meet the requirements of your university or college and sustain your interest and enthusiasm. In Chapter 4, we help you with establishing boundaries to your research, so you know how much you need to do and so you can make sure that your project is feasible and realistic. We also help you turn your topic ideas into achievable research objectives, questions and hypotheses. In Chapter 5, we help you to identify what is the most appropriate literature for your assignments and dissertations by looking at the vast range of secondary information that is available and giving you a guide to what is worth including. We suggest good ways of showing that you have met the academic requirement of using a 'wide range' of secondary data.

In Chapter 6, we show you how to become critical readers of typical academic literature in business and management, a key requirement of postgraduate education. Although the focus is on developing your skills at reading academic journal articles, this skill needs to be developed for all your work. Chapter 7 offers practical advice on how to organize your burgeoning collection of notes and data, how to record and store material and how to start sorting and coding raw data. In Chapter 8, we help you to learn to reflect – to make sure that you are actually learning from doing your research to become a better researcher and a better manager with a consistent approach to tackling and leaning from problems and experience. Chapter 9 returns to more academic issues that are essential for passing and getting good marks in your work – making sure that your research is reliable and valid and helping you to decide where you can generalize from it to other situations or populations. In Chapter 10, we provide practical advice on how to write up your research. This includes a consideration of who you are writing for – your audience – and how to plan your dissertation; we also suggest a possible structure for your work and discuss how to present an effective argument.

What is Management Research and What Does it Mean at Masters' Level?

What Have I Got to Do?

This chapter starts by discussing what exactly the purpose and focus of management research is; which is not as obvious as it might at first seem. The aim is to provide a context for what follows in the succeeding chapters. It provides a guide to what various leading academics think about their subject, explains why it is a topic of debate and provides some background to what you will be learning on your Masters' or diploma course. It identifies the potentially significant contributions that can be made by Masters' students to management knowledge through carrying out research projects, and discusses the need for a critical approach in all management research and thinking.

The rest of this book guides you through the process of finding ideas for research topics, particularly with dissertations in mind. It suggests useful tools and techniques for making your research project manageable and achievable, and helps you to find a means of tracking down, assessing and evaluating information, drawing valid conclusions from it and writing it up.

What is Management Research?

As part of your Masters' degree or diploma, you will be expected to undertake some research into business and management. Before you start, you need to know what exactly constitutes 'research' in business and management and why it is worth doing. More than 85 universities and colleges in the UK teach management as a degree level subject (McLaughlin and Thorpe, 2000) and there are, of course, many more world-wide. Most of them also carry out research into the subject. But it is not clear what all this research is for, nor whether it is trying to do something practical – given that management is seen by many people as a practical subject – or whether it is in pursuit of knowledge for its own sake – which is perhaps what academic study is for. In 1994, Burgoyne suggested that there were a number of facets of management learning that arose both from doing research into the subject and from the practical experience of management. In his view, it is an applied philosophy in the sense of applying theory to the solution of practical problems, and research in the subject area should focus on that.

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He described management as an 'emerging' area of study that changes all the time, with a focus that is multidisciplinary and that borrows and synthesizes from many academic disciplines, as well as being an area of professional practice (Burgoyne, 1994). The quality of management research was recognized as a problem by the 'Bain Report' in 1994, which suggested that all management research should try to improve the understanding and practice of managers through what they termed 'the double hurdle' of research that is high quality both from the point of view of managers and of researchers. Bain thought academics should develop research on topics that are of critical importance to organizations and managers, and that the users of such research should be committed to academic independence and freedom to publish (McLaughlin and Thorpe, 2000).

In a much quoted article and one that is well worth reading, Tranfield and Starkey in 1998 posed some key questions about the nature and purpose of academic research in business and management. For example, they ask whether management research in universities is primarily for managers? Or is it about them and their organizations? The problem of defining exactly what constitutes management research goes much wider than just this. There is both uncertainty as to its status, a lack of consensus as to how it should be carried out, which can make it difficult to execute, and recognition of the limits of scientific methods and any claims that it is value free. The academic debate about the nature and relevance of management research has continued on both sides of the Atlantic, notably in the pages of the *British Journal of Management*, which devoted a whole special issue to the subject in 2001, and in the US-based *Academy of Management Review*.

Just as more and more students are studying and researching the topic of management at university, out in the workplace management has become more than just a job. Managers are being given a critical role in reshaping society in areas such as reforming the public services. This alone makes it essential that we carry out good quality research into how this is working out in practice. Increasingly, management academics are arguing that management now needs to be supported by a research base that reflects the interests of society as a whole, not just one part of it. For example, in the past, management research has reflected the assumption that management is a white able-bodied male activity (McLaughlin and Thorpe, 2000).

The immense scope and potential role of management research makes it open to criticism from many specific subject areas and the breadth of possibilities of research within it may mean that many topics are only researched at a superficial level. Tranfield and Starkey (1998) applied a framework for exploring the attributes of academic subjects to the whole subject of management. For anyone who reads this thinking that the course they are on will give them access to a coherent body of knowledge and practice that can then be applied in the world of work, be prepared to be disappointed! They characterize management as a soft (in the sense that it is not governed by a body of theory subscribed to by all management researchers, however loosely defined), applied, divergent (as it lacks a unity of purpose), and rural discipline (because there is a wide area of study with no clear demarcation lines and little communication between researchers). They suggest that management's position in the social sciences is similar to the position of engineering in the physical sciences or medicine in biological science. They conclude that management research needs to be 'transdisciplinary', heterogeneous, more socially accountable and to involve collaboration from different disciplines. By 'transdisciplinary', they suggest that management research should be developing its own framework to guide problem solving that is at some level practical, but also has theoretical elements and so will represent a contribution to knowledge. They issue a call for such research to be cross-cultural rather than guided by American experience.

The Management Research Tradition in Business Schools

If you consider very briefly the history of management education at degree level, it is easy to discern a number of phases of management school development. The first MBA was introduced at Harvard University in 1908 (Mintzberg, 2004) and the second one, also in the USA, at Stanford in 1925. Although management has been taught at degree level since the beginning of the 20th century in some countries, it was not until the 1960s that the subject really began to take off on an international scale. Early management departments tended to be heavily US influenced, and to involve disciplines such as engineering, accounting, economics, and behavioural science. Their research base was and is strongly rooted in applied quantitative methods, with a view of research strongly oriented towards the natural sciences. In the 1960s, management researchers tended to adopt a multidisciplinary approach, borrowing from economics and psychology, and from the professions, particularly accountancy and marketing. There was a strong emphasis on effective decision-making, the use of quantitative methods of analysis, and model-building. This approach is sometimes described as normative theories of management and is still dominant in the USA and France. Ehrensal (n.d) argues that in the USA management research focuses on a 'science of administration' so that its aim is to train future managers, and not to critically appraise existing values and systems of management. Mintzberg suggests that the MBA programmes taught in US business schools reduce 'managing to decision-making and decision-making to analysis' (Mintzberg, 2004: 38), with a particular emphasis within that on evaluation of possible choices when decisions are made, as that is the sole area amenable to systematic analysis.

Mintzberg (1973) and many others have criticized this research tradition as unrealistic, because it is not based on observation of what managers actually do and implicitly therefore lacks a sociological perspective. Their approach stresses the need to help

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managers to do better what they do most of, which is working and negotiating with others, rather than devising and implementing grand strategies. They advocate the use of 'softer' research methods to describe and analyse these modes of working. In the 1980s, management as a subject became more interdisciplinary, with a more open attitude to learning from many research traditions, and a tendency to view it increasingly as an applied behavioural science. One European-based school of thought argues strongly that even this on its own is insufficient, as the interpretation of data is so often unreflective. 'Reflexive understanding', which involves a self-critical look at our own assumptions and perspectives, is in this view essential to carrying out high-quality research in management and business, as is the need to include historical and political research perspectives as an acknowledgement of the dominant tradition.

A third phase of management school development that involves the inclusion of pedagogic strategies to facilitate learning and embracing learning about management for the sake of it, rather than to solve a specific problem, is now underway. The learning processes are seen as being as important as the management tools used to solve the knotty issue for managers that is under study. Management research is a living subject that changes, stretches and grows, so that a circular process whereby theory informs practice that informs theory is seen as the ideal, although Das (2003) would argue that theory does not inform practice, as the former is too far removed from the latter to be of any practical use. However, in the last 10 years or so there has been a collective attempt to redress this, partially through the acceptance and credibility of MBA programmes at renowned higher education institutions, originating in the USA, but now firmly entrenched in Europe.

Why Do People Do Management Research?

There are many reasons why people choose to be active researchers in the management area. There is internal pressure for university departments to be seen to be engaging with research and having a demonstrable research output that can then be fed back into teaching. For purely pragmatic reasons, if you are an academic, it is likely to improve your credibility within your given subject if you have researched and published in the relevant journals or perhaps contributed to a textbook. Your research and subsequent publications will give you some kudos amongst colleagues and could also enhance your academic career aspirations.

Many academics and practitioners also want to improve understanding of their subject. Research within a specific area with the aim of developing understanding about a given management issue is one of the most effective ways of achieving this. The drive to move a subject forwards and the satisfaction from being part of an evolutionary process is