

Choosing a research topic and developing your research proposal

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ENT 636
Research Project

Lecture 2



Chapter
02

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter you should:

- identify the characteristics of a good research topic;
- generate and refine ideas to choose a suitable research topic;
- express your research topic as a clear research question(s), and as an aim and objectives;
- understand the relationship between the research question(s), research aim and research objectives;
- recognize the role of theory in developing the research question(s), research aim and research objectives;
- develop a written research proposal that outlines your proposed research project.

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02

Introduction

Before you start your research, you need to have at least some idea of what you want to do. This is probably the most difficult, and yet the most important, part of your research project.

If you are not clear about what you are going to research, it will be difficult to plan how you are going to research it..

Arriving at a clearly defined research topic is still likely to be iterative, involving you in a process of formulating, clarifying and re-formulating your research idea(s) until it becomes an acceptable and practical topic.

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Introduction

Part of this process will involve you devising one or more research questions, a related aim and set of research objectives.

Once you are clear about your research topic, and the research question(s), aim and objectives that operationalise it, you will be better able to choose the most appropriate research strategy and data collection and analysis techniques;

The processes involved in choosing your research topic and developing your research proposal will be time consuming. However, without spending time on this you are far less likely to achieve a successful project.

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Introduction

It is important to work on something that will sustain your interest throughout the months that you will need to complete it.

Choosing your research project is a developmental exercise; not just in terms of generating and refining possible ideas and developing your research proposal, but also in terms of your self-development

Undertaking a research project will involve engaging in personal reflectivity and reflexivity.

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Introduction

Lincoln et al. (2011) define reflexivity as ‘the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher’. Research is like going on a journey.

It is a journey that involves you making a number of decisions. Being reflexive will ensure you reflect on why you choose a research topic, why you prefer one research strategy over another, how you engage with those whom you wish to take part in your research, how you use the data they reveal to you, how you deal with any problems that confront you during your project, and so on.

Chapter
02

Introduction

It will allow you to surface any preconceived ideas that you may have about your topic and what you expect to find, and help you to be aware of your own biases.

Critical reflectivity may be approached not just through an introspective examination of the ways your attitudes and actions affect your role as researcher, but also in relation to the way broader social assumptions and context may influence it.

Many preconceived ideas and personal biases have a social basis.

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Characteristics of a good research topic

Appropriateness

The scope of the research topic that you choose and the nature of the research proposal that you produce will need to meet the requirements of Midocean University.

You therefore need to check the assessment criteria for your research project and ensure that your choice of topic and the specification of your proposal will enable you to meet these criteria. If you are unsure, you should discuss any uncertainties with your supervisor

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Characteristics of a good research topic

It will be important to use existing theory from the academic literature to inform your choice of research topic and in the development of your research proposal.

As part of your assessment criteria you are almost certain to be asked to consider the theoretical context of your research topic in your research proposal.

As we discussed earlier, using existing theory should help you to clarify your research topic and to inform your research question, aim and objectives.

Using theory should also help you to develop clear definitions of the concepts that you use in your research.

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Characteristics of a good research topic

It is also important that your topic will have symmetry of potential outcomes: that is, your results will be of similar value whatever you find out.

Without this symmetry you may spend a considerable amount of time researching your topic, only to find an answer of little importance.

Whatever the outcome, you need to ensure you have the scope to write an interesting project report.

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Characteristics of a good research topic

Capability

Your research topic must also be something you are capable of undertaking.

Capability can be considered in a variety of ways. At the personal level you need to feel comfortable that you have, or can develop, the skills that will be required to research the topic.

Hopefully, you will develop your research skills as part of undertaking your project, such as those related to data analysis.

However, some skills, for example, learning a new foreign language, may be impossible to acquire in the time you have available.

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Characteristics of a good research topic

Capability also means you must be reasonably certain of gaining access to any data you might need to collect.

Many people start with ideas where access to data will prove difficult. Certain, more sensitive topics, such as financial performance or decision making by senior managers, are potentially fascinating.

However, they may present considerable access problems. You should, therefore, discuss this with your project supervisor.

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Characteristics of a good research topic

Your ability to find the financial and time resources to undertake research on the topic will also affect your capability.

This relates, in part, to the concept of feasibility (will be discussed later). Some topics are unlikely to be possible to complete in the time allowed by your course of study. This may be because they require you to measure the impact of an intervention over a long time period or because of their complexity.

Similarly, topics that are likely to require you to travel widely or use expensive equipment or specialist software not available at your university should also be disregarded unless financial resources permit.



Box 2.1 Checklist

Characteristics of a good research topic

Appropriateness

- ✓ Does the research topic fit the specifications and meet the standards set by the examining institution?
- ✓ Does the research topic contain issues that have a clear link to theory?
- ✓ Are you able to state your research question(s), aim and objectives clearly?
- ✓ Will the proposed research be able to provide fresh insights into this topic?
- ✓ Are the findings for this research topic likely to be symmetrical: that is, of similar value whatever the outcome?

Capability

- ✓ Do you have, or can you develop within the project time frame, the necessary research skills to undertake the research topic?
- ✓ Is the research topic achievable within the available time?
- ✓ Is the research topic achievable within the financial resources that are likely to be available?
- ✓ Are you reasonably certain of being able to gain access to data you are likely to require for this research topic?

Fulfilment

- ✓ Does the research topic really interest and motivate you?
- ✓ Will the research topic help towards the achievement of your future aspirations or career goals?

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Generating and refining research topic ideas

If you have not been given a research idea there is a range of techniques that can be used to find and select a topic that you would like to research.

These can be divided into two groups: those that predominantly involve rational thinking and those that involve more creative thinking

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More frequently used techniques for generating and refining research ideas

Rational thinking

- Examining your own strengths and interests
- Examining academic staff research interests
- Looking at past project titles
- Discussion
- Searching existing literature
- Scanning the media

Creative thinking

- Keeping a notebook of your ideas
- Exploring personal preferences using past projects
- Exploring relevance to business using the literature
- Relevance trees
- Brainstorming

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In my experience, it is usually better to use both rational and creative techniques. In order to do this you will need to have some understanding of the techniques and the ways in which they work. Therefore, the possible ways they might be used to generate research ideas are discussed later.

These techniques will generate one of two outcomes:

- one or more possible project ideas that you might undertake;
- few ideas that relate to your interests. In this case you may want to revise the area in which you are interested, either by choosing another area or by refining and perhaps narrowing or widening your original area of interest. In either instance, it is suggested that you make some notes and arrange to talk to your supervisor.

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Rational thinking techniques for generating research ideas

Examining your own strengths and interests

It is important that you choose a topic in which you are likely to do well and, if possible, already have some academic knowledge. One way of doing this is to look at completed assignments for which you have received good grades. Many, if not most, of these assignments are likely to be in subject areas in which you have an interest. These assignments will provide you with subject areas in which to search and find a research idea.

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Rational thinking techniques for generating research ideas

Examining academic staff research interests

The research area of academic staff at your university could be of interest for your own project. The subject area or areas taught by each member of staff are likely to demonstrate their particular research interests.

Try to get to know the publications and conference papers of your academic staff. These provide even more detail about the exact nature of their research interests. Working through this information may allow you to generate ideas for your own research and guide you to some initial reading to test this interest.

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Rational thinking techniques for generating research ideas

Looking at past project titles

Looking at past projects a useful way of generating research ideas. A common way of doing this is to scan a list of past project titles for anything that captures your imagination. Titles that look interesting or which grab your attention should be noted.

Based on this you can think of new ideas in the same general area that will enable you to provide fresh insights. Scanning actual research projects may also produce research ideas. However, you need to beware. The fact that a project you found is no guarantee of the quality of the arguments and observations it contains.

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Rational thinking techniques for generating research ideas

Discussion

Colleagues, friends and university tutors are all potentially good sources of possible research ideas. Ideas can also be obtained by talking to people who work in, or have direct experience of, the topic area in which you are interested to develop a research idea. Self-employed people and small business owners may be useful to talk to depending on your proposed topic area.

It is important that as well as discussing possible ideas you also make a note of them. What seemed like a good idea in the coffee shop may not be remembered quite so clearly after the following lecture!

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Rational thinking techniques for generating research ideas

Searching existing literature

As part of your discussions, relevant literature may also be suggested. There are various types of literature that are of particular use for generating research ideas. These include:

- articles in academic journals;
- articles in professional journals;
- reports;
- books.

Academic journal articles nearly always contain a section that reviews literature relevant to the article's topic area. Given the nature of published research, such articles are generally highly specialized, focusing on a particular aspect of a entrepreneurship and innovation subject

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Rational thinking techniques for generating research ideas

You will need to be prepared to undertake an extensive search lasting some hours (or even days) to find articles that might be helpful in generating research ideas related to your broader topic of interest. Useful online platform such as Google Scholar, Researchgate Academia, etc.

Of particular use, where you can find suitable ones, are academic review articles . Some journals only publish review articles – so look out for these! These articles contain a considered review of the state of knowledge in a particular topic area and are therefore likely to contain a wealth of ideas about that area. These ideas will act as pointers towards aspects where further research needs to be undertaken.

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Rational thinking techniques for generating research ideas

Scanning the media

Keeping up to date with items in the news can be a very rich source of ideas.

Example: Sustainable entrepreneurship

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Creative thinking techniques for generating research ideas

Keeping a notebook of your ideas

One of the more creative techniques that we all use is to keep a notebook of ideas. This involves simply noting down any interesting research ideas as you think of them and, of equal importance, what sparked off your thought.

You can then pursue the idea using more rational thinking techniques later. Keep a notebook by your bed so you can jot down any flashes of inspiration that occur to you in the middle of the night

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Creative thinking techniques for generating research ideas

Exploring personal preferences using past projects

One way to generate and evaluate possible project ideas is to explore your personal preferences by reading through a number of past project reports. To get started you need to search through these and select a number that you like and a number that you do not like.

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Creative thinking techniques for generating research ideas

For each project that you like, note down your first thoughts in response to each of the following questions:

- 1 What do you like in general about the project?
- 2 Why do you like the project?
- 3 Which ideas in the project appeal to you?

For each project that you do not like, note down your first thoughts in response to each of the following questions:

- 1 What do you dislike in general about the project?
- 2 Why do you dislike the project?
- 3 Which ideas in the project do not appeal to you?

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Creative thinking techniques for generating research ideas

When you have completed this task, you may find it helpful to spend some time reflecting on each set of notes – for the projects you like and those you do not. By Reflecting on and thinking about each list you should begin to understand those project Characteristics that are important to you and with which you feel comfortable.

Of equal importance, you will have identified those with which you are uncomfortable and should avoid. This process has two benefits. Firstly, it may help you to generate possible research ideas. Secondly, you may use the project characteristics that emerge from exploring your personal preferences as parameters against which to evaluate possible research ideas.

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Creative thinking techniques for generating research ideas

Relevance trees

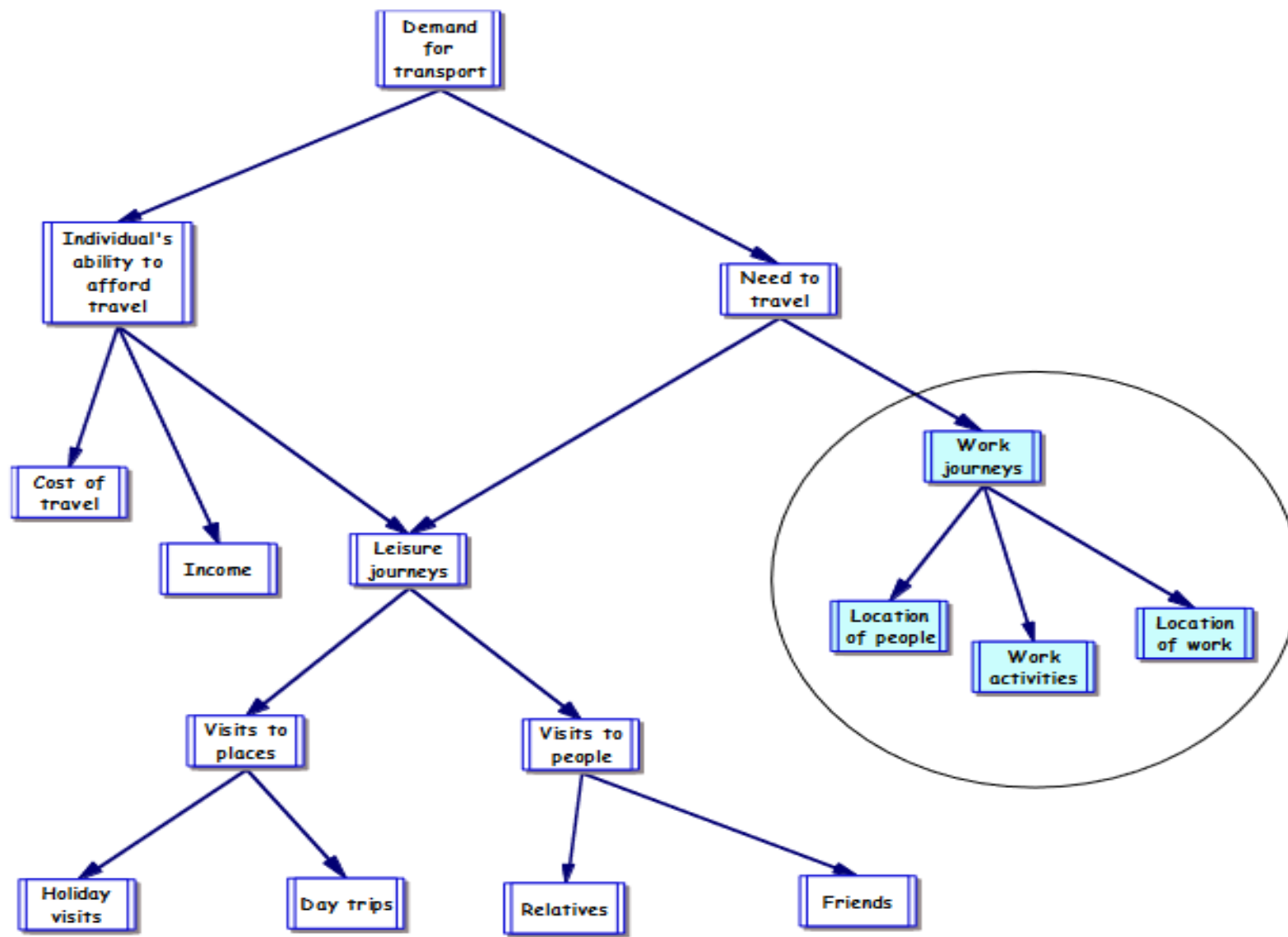
Relevance trees may also prove useful in generating research topics. In this instance, their use is similar to that of mind mapping in which you start with a broad concept from which you generate further (usually more specific) topics. Each of these topics forms a separate branch from which you can generate further, more detailed subbranches.

As you proceed down the sub-branches more ideas are generated and recorded. These can then be examined and a number selected and combined to provide a research idea. This technique is discussed in more detail later.

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Creative thinking techniques for generating research ideas

A relevance tree allows you to map out your initial ideas on a topic, in this case ‘demand for transport’, and think through various sub-topics in order to help you identify a specific area to research. Here, TWO key factors are suggested as affecting ‘demand for transport’: ‘the individual’s ability to pay’ and the ‘need to travel’. Although a number of ideas are considered in response to the overall topic of ‘demand for transport’, the sub-topic of ‘work journeys’ as a branch from ‘need to travel’ appears to offer the best focus for a research project (this is placed in a circle). Thinking through a relevance tree, and perhaps adding notes regarding possible sources of information for each topic, can help you see whether your topic is too broad or too narrow to work as a dissertation project



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Creative thinking techniques for generating research ideas

Brainstorming

The technique of brainstorming can also be used to generate and refine research ideas. It is best undertaken with a group of people, although you can brainstorm on your own.

Brainstorming involves a number of stages:

1 Defining the problem. This will focus on the sorts of ideas you are interested in – as precisely as possible. In the early stages of formulating a topic this may be as vague as, ‘I am interested in social entrepreneurship but don’t know what to do for my research topic’.

2 Asking for suggestions. These will relate to the problem.

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Creative thinking techniques for generating research ideas

3 Recording suggestions. As you record these you will need to observe the following rules:

- No suggestion should be criticized or evaluated in any way before all ideas have been considered.
- All suggestions, however wild, should be recorded and considered.
- As many suggestions as possible should be recorded.

4 Reviewing suggestions. You will seek to explore what is meant by each as you review these.

5 Analyzing suggestions. Work through the list of ideas and decide which appeal to you most as research ideas and why.

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The preliminary inquiry

Having generated a research idea you will need to refine it to choose a suitable topic and express it as a clear research question(s), an aim and objectives. This will involve searching for and evaluating literature and other related sources. Even if you searched the literature to generate your initial research idea, it is likely to be necessary to conduct another search of it in order to refine this idea into a workable research question.

Once you have your initial research idea you can re-visit the literature with a much clearer focus to understand how this helps you to refine your research idea, choose your topic and to develop the research question(s), aim and set of objectives.

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The preliminary inquiry

This search activity to refine, focus and operationalise your initial research idea into a suitable research topic and then into a research question(s), aim and objectives involves a preliminary inquiry or initial inquiry. This may lead to the first iteration of your critical literature review, or help to inform it.

For some researchers the preliminary inquiry may include informal discussions with people who have personal experience of and knowledge about your research ideas. It may also involve gaining a good understanding of your host organization.

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The preliminary inquiry

Integrating ideas

Integrating ideas will help your research to have a clear purpose and direction.

‘Working up and narrowing down’ process is useful. It involves classifying each research idea first into its area, then its field, and finally the precise aspect in which you are interested.

These represent an increasingly detailed description of the research idea. For example, your initial area, based on examining your coursework, might be accountancy. After searching through relevant journal articles and holding a discussion with colleagues this might become more focused on the field of financial accounting methods. After a further literature search and reading, and discussion with your project tutor you decide to focus on the aspect of activity-based costing.

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Developing your research proposal

You will know when the process of generating and refining ideas is complete as you will be able to say, 'I'd like to do some research on ...'. At this point, you will have chosen your research topic based on a clearly defined research idea!

Obviously there is still a big gap between this and being able to start serious work on your research project. You will, however, be in position to develop your research proposal, commencing with expressing your research topic as a research question(s), related research aim and set of research objectives.

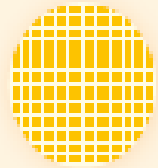
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Developing your research proposal

Expressing your topic as a research question(s)

It will be important for you to express your research topic as a clearly defined research question before commencing the research process. You are likely to be required to include a research question in your written research proposal. The importance of creating a clearly defined research question cannot be overemphasized. A research question will allow you to say what the issue or problem is that you wish to study and what your research project will seek to find out, explain and answer.

One of the key criteria of your research success will be whether you have developed a set of clear conclusions from the data you have collected. The extent to which you can do that will be determined largely by the clarity with which you have posed your research question



Box 2.6

Focus on student research

Defining the research question

Imran was studying for a BSc in Business Management and undertaking his placement year in an advanced consumer electronics company. When he first joined the company he was surprised to note that the company's business strategy, which was announced in the company newsletter, seemed to be inconsistent with what Imran knew of the product market.

Imran had become particularly interested in corporate strategy in his degree. He was familiar with some of the literature which suggested that corporate strategy should be linked to the general external environment in which the organisation operated. He wanted to do some research on corporate strategy in his organisation for his research project.

After talking this over with his project tutor, Imran decided on the following research question: 'Why does [organisation's name]'s corporate strategy not seem to reflect the major factors in the external operating environment?'

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02

Developing your research proposal

Defining research questions, rather like generating research ideas, is not a straightforward matter. A question that only prompts a descriptive answer – for example, ‘What is the proportion of business graduates start their own business?’ – is far easier to answer than: ‘Why are business graduates are more likely to start their own business?’ However, answering the first question is unlikely to satisfy your examining committee as it only needs description.

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Developing your research proposal

Questions may be divided into ones that are exploratory, descriptive, explanatory or evaluative.

Any research question you ask is likely to begin with or include either ‘What’, ‘When’, ‘Where’, ‘Who’, ‘Why’, or ‘How’. Each of these will lead to an answer that is partly descriptive and sometimes entirely descriptive, such as: ‘How much did the marketing campaign for the new range of products cost?’

Exploratory questions are likely to begin with ‘How’ or ‘What’. For example, ‘How has the corporate rebranding strategy affected consumer attitudes?’

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Developing your research proposal

Questions that seek explanations will either commence with ‘Why’ or contain this word within the question. For example, a question may ask customers what they think about a new product and why they like or dislike it.

Questions that are evaluative are also likely to begin with ‘How’ or ‘What’ but unlike the ‘How much...?’ or ‘How has...?’ questions, an evaluative question might ask, ‘How effective was the marketing campaign for the new range of products?’ Another way of wording this type of question might be, ‘To what extent was the marketing campaign effective and why?’ We discuss further the relationship between ‘How’, ‘What’ and ‘Why’ questions later.

Research idea**Research question**

Media campaign following product recalls

How effective is a media campaign designed to increase consumer trust in [company name] following a series of product recalls?

Graduate recruitment via the Internet

To what extent and in what type of context is Internet-based recruitment and selection of graduates effective and why?

Supermarket coupons as a promotional device

In what ways does the issue of coupons at supermarket checkouts affect buyer behaviour?

Challenger banks and small businesses

How has the emergence of challenger banks impacted upon small businesses' financing and why?

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02

Developing your research proposal

Writing a research aim and set of research objectives

As well as your research question, you may also be required to formulate a research aim.

A research aim is a brief statement of the purpose of the research project. It is often written as a sentence stating what you intend to achieve through your research.

To illustrate this, the examples of research questions in the table below have been matched to their research aims. You will see the close relationship between these – one stated as a question, the other as an aim.

Research question

How effective is a media campaign designed to increase consumer trust in [company name] following a series of product recalls?

In which situations and to what extent is Internet-based recruitment and selection of graduates effective and why?

In what ways does the issue of coupons at supermarket checkouts affect buyer behaviour?

How has the emergence of challenger banks impacted upon small businesses' financing and why?

Research aim

The aim of this research is to assess the effectiveness of a media campaign by [company name] designed to increase consumer trust following a series of recalls of its products.

The aim of this research is to understand situations within which Internet-based recruitment and selection of graduates is effective and why.

The aim of this research is to explore how the issue of coupons at supermarket checkouts affects buyer behaviour.

The aim of this research is to explore how the emergence of challenger banks has impacted upon small businesses' financing and why.

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Developing your research proposal

Your research question and research aim are complementary ways of saying what your research is about. However, neither gives sufficient detail about the steps you will need to take to answer your question and achieve your aim.

To do this you will need to devise a set of investigative questions or research objectives. Your research question may be used to generate more detailed investigative questions, or you may use it as a base from which to write a set of research objectives.

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Developing your research proposal

Objectives are more generally acceptable to the research community as evidence of the researcher's clear sense of purpose and direction.

Research objectives allow you to operationalise your question – that is, to state the steps you intend to take to answer it. A similar way of thinking about the difference between questions, aims and objectives is related to 'what' and 'how'. Research questions and aims express 'what' your research is about. Research objectives express 'how' you intend to structure the research process to answer your question and achieve your aim. In this way, research objectives can be seen to complement a research question and aim, through providing the means to operationalise them. They provide a key step to transform your research question and aim into your research project.

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Developing your research proposal

Writing useful research objectives requires you to fulfil a number of fit-for-purpose criteria.

The table below sets out criteria to help you devise research objectives to operationalise your research question and aim. Each of these criteria is also rephrased as a short question, which you can use as a checklist to evaluate your own draft research objectives.

Criterion

Purpose

Transparency

(What does it mean?)

The meaning of the research objective is clear and unambiguous

Specificity

(What I am going to do?)

The purpose of the research objective is clear and easily understood, as are the actions required to fulfil it

Relevance

(Why I am going to do this?)

The research objective's link to the research question and wider research project is clear

Interconnectivity

(How will it help to complete the research project?)

Taken together as a set, the research objectives illustrate the steps in the research process from its start to its conclusion, without leaving any gaps. In this way, the research objectives form a coherent whole

Answerability

(Will this be possible?)

(Where shall I obtain data?)

The intended outcome of the research objective is achievable. Where this relates to data, the nature of the data required will be clear or at least implied

Measurability

(When will it be done?)

The intended product of the research objective will be evident when it has been achieved

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02

What is theory?

The term theory is used to refer to ‘a systematic body of knowledge grounded in empirical evidence which can be used for explanatory or predictive purposes’. Theories are therefore based upon the development and examination of concepts, the clear definition of concepts being essential for testing and developing theory.

A theory uses related facts and concepts to provide an explanation or predict an outcome. The explanatory power of a theory is based on its ability to explain relationships between concepts. These explanations need to be capable of being confirmed, refined or contradicted as understandings develop and change based on further research.

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What is theory?

To explore the question ‘what is theory?’ in more detail, Whetten (1989) identified that theory is composed of four elements, related to ‘what’, ‘how’, ‘why’ and a fourth group of ‘who’, ‘where’ and ‘when’.

The first of these may be summarised as: what are the concepts or variables that the theory examines? For example, Trait Theory of Entrepreneurship. The trait theory of entrepreneurship focuses on the personal characteristics and attributes of entrepreneurs that contribute to their success. It suggests that certain innate traits, such as risk-taking propensity, passion, determination, creativity, and resilience, distinguish entrepreneurs from non-entrepreneurs.

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02

What is theory?

The second element may be summarised as: how are these concepts or variables related?

A key aspect here is causality. Theory is concerned with cause and effect. Advocates of Trait Theory of Entrepreneurship argue that these traits are crucial in driving individuals to take on the uncertainties and challenges associated with entrepreneurial ventures. In other words, how did change in entrepreneur traits have an effect on their behaviour?

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What is theory?

The second element may be summarised as: how are these concepts or variables related?

A key aspect here is causality. Theory is concerned with cause and effect. Advocates of Trait Theory of Entrepreneurship argue that these traits are crucial in driving individuals to take on the uncertainties and challenges associated with entrepreneurial ventures. In other words, how did change in entrepreneur traits have an effect on their behaviour?

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What is theory?

The third element may be summarized as: why are these concepts or variables related? This is the critical element in a theory because it explains the reasons for relationships between the concepts or variables.

According to Whetten, ‘what’ and ‘how’ are descriptive; it is ‘why’ that explains the relationship. This point is worth developing, as you may be asking, ‘what is the difference between “how” and “why” in this context?’ Data will allow to recognize relationships.

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02

What is theory?

While good theory has the power to explain and predict, it may also be subject to limitations. The scope of many theories will be limited by one or more constraints.

The fourth group of elements that Whetten identified may therefore be summarised as: who does this theory apply to; where does this theory apply; when does this theory apply?

In this way, the explanations of the cause-and-effect relationships between variables in a theory may be contextual and time limited, indicating constraints to their generalisability.

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02

How is theory developed and how does theory inform your research question and research objectives?

Theory published in the literature may inform your proposed research question in several ways. It will help you to formulate a research question that should lead to a theoretical explanation, rather than just a descriptive answer.

It will allow you to find out whether others have asked similar questions to the question you propose. Where you find that a similar research question to yours has been addressed in the literature, you will be able to learn about the context within which it was explored and how the research was conducted.

This may help to focus your question to provide you with a set of variables to test, or concepts to explore, to determine whether, how and why they are related in the context of your own research project

Chapter
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How is theory developed and how does theory inform your research question and research objectives?

It is unlikely that you will fail to find any literature that relates to your proposed question, although where you find that you are working in a more specialised topic area, this discovery may also help to focus your research question to relate to the theory that you locate.

It will be important to discuss how the results of your research relate to theory, to be able to assess that theory in the context of your work and to demonstrate the theoretical contribution, no matter how limited, of your research.

Where you simply find it difficult to formulate a research question from your research idea, using existing theory may also help you to achieve this.

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How is theory developed and how does theory inform your research question and research objectives?

How theory is developed also provides a crucial reason for recognising relevant theory when writing your research question and objectives.

Your research project will be designed to test a theory or to develop a theory. Where you wish to adopt a clear theoretical position that you will test through the collection of data, your research project will be theory driven and you will be using a deductive approach.

Where you wish to explore a topic and develop a theoretical explanation as the data are collected and analyzed, your research project will be data driven and you will be adopting an inductive approach .

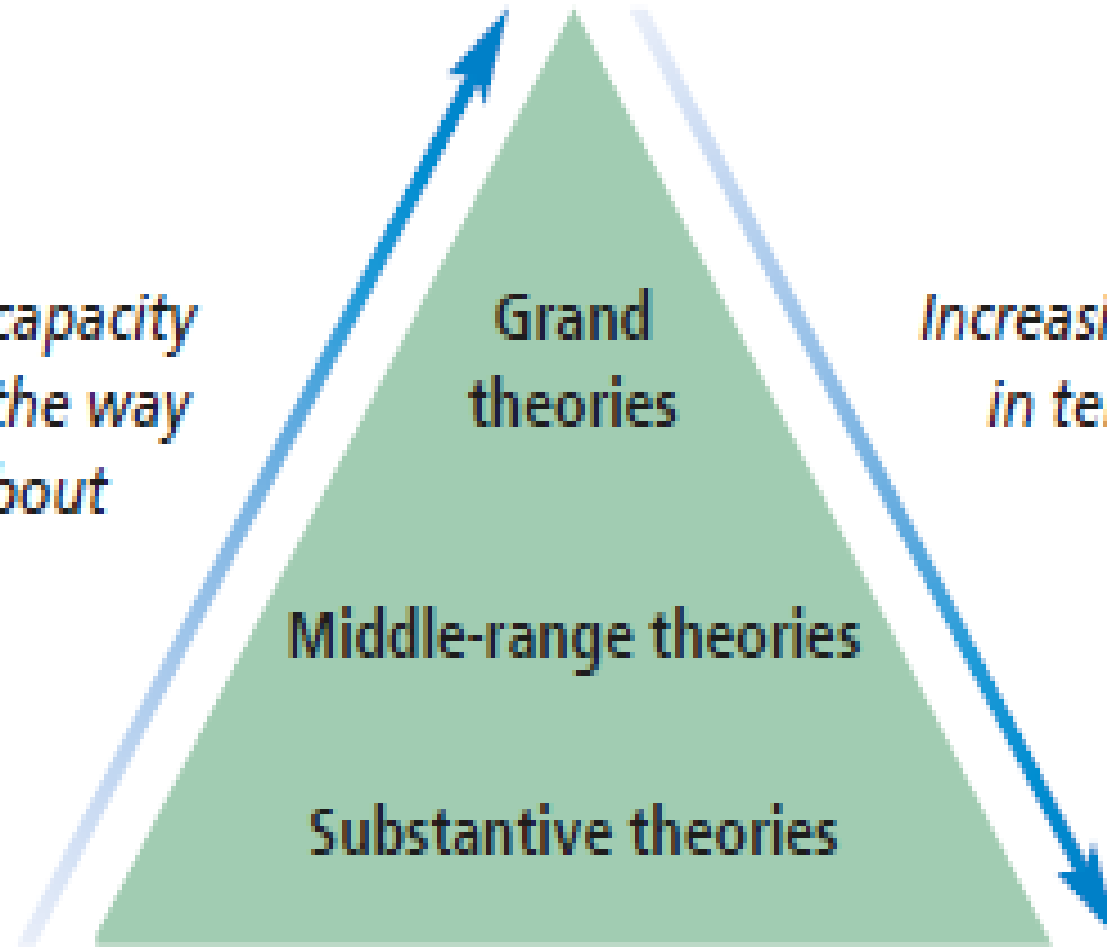
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What types of theoretical contribution might be made?

Not all theoretical contributions are the same and it is reassuring to look at the threefold typology of theories shown in figure below.

‘Grand theories’ are usually thought to be the province of the natural scientists (e.g. Newton’s theory of gravity, Darwin’s theory of evolution or Einstein’s theory of relativity). These may be contrasted with ‘middle-range theories’, which lack the capacity to change the way in which we think about the world but are nonetheless of significance. Some theories such as Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs and Herzberg et al.’s (1959) two-factor theory of motivation are well known to managers and would be in this category. However, most of us are concerned with ‘substantive theories’ that are restricted to a particular time, research setting, group or population or problem.

*Increasing capacity
to change the way
we think about
the world*



Grand
theories

Middle-range theories

Substantive theories

*Increasing restrictions
in terms of general
applicability*

Chapter
02

Writing your research proposal

The research proposal , occasionally referred to as a protocol or outline, is a structured plan of your proposed research project. In this section I wil discuss why it is necessary and how it may be structured.

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02

Writing your research proposal



Box 2.11 Checklist to guide and evaluate your research proposal

- ✓ Have I explained what am I going to do?
- ✓ Have I explained why I am doing this?
- ✓ Have I said why it is worth doing?
- ✓ Have I explained how it relates to what has been done before in my subject area?
- ✓ Have I stated which theory or theories will inform what I am doing and how I will use it or them?
- ✓ Have I stated my research question(s), research aim and my research objectives?
- ✓ Have I outlined how I will conduct my research?
- ✓ Have I outlined my research design?
- ✓ Have I outlined what data I need?
- ✓ Have I stated who and where my intended participants are?
- ✓ Have I explained how I will select my participants?
- ✓ Have I explained how I will gain access?
- ✓ Have I outlined how I will collect my data?
- ✓ Have I outlined how I will analyse my data and use this to develop theoretical explanations?
- ✓ Have I outlined what data quality issues I might encounter?
- ✓ Have I outlined how I will seek to overcome these data quality issues?
- ✓ Have I considered the ethical issues I might encounter at each stage of my research?
- ✓ Have I outlined how I will address these?

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Writing your research proposal

We first consider three such criteria that are likely to be used to assess your research proposal: coherence, ethical considerations and feasibility.

Coherence

A research project is a complex and time-consuming activity. As indicated earlier, you are likely to benefit from creating a clear specification to guide your research project. Your project supervisor and any other assessor will be looking for evidence of coherence and lucidity in the way you have written your research proposal, to demonstrate that it will be fit for purpose and able to direct your research activity.

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Writing your research proposal

Ethical considerations

Part of the approval process for your research proposal may involve it being considered and approved by a research ethics committee. The university's code of ethical practice is likely to require all research involving human participants to be considered and approved, especially where research involves young or vulnerable participants. It may also be necessary to state how data will be stored, whether they will be kept after the research is completed and under what conditions, in order to ensure the continuing anonymity of the participants and confidentiality of their data.

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02

Writing your research proposal

Feasibility

You may have devised a coherent and well-structured research proposal that would create much interest but it may not be possible to achieve, or sensible to contemplate. Feasibility is a multifaceted criterion that your assessors will be concerned about. Your proposal may not be possible to achieve in the time available to undertake the research project and produce your dissertation. It may be that data collection would not be possible because you would not be able to gain access to participants, or it might not be practical and your tutor will tell you so! The proposal may require resources that are not available, finance commitments that are unaffordable or skills that you have not developed and would not be able to acquire in the timescale of the project.

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02

How can your research proposal be structured?

Title

The title should simply and concisely summarise the research question. It should avoid unnecessary phrases such as, 'A study to explore ...' Instead it should reflect the concepts or variables in your research question. If your research question changes, this will naturally lead to a change to your title.

Chapter
02

How can your research proposal be structured?

Background

This section introduces the reader to the research issue or problem. This addresses the question, ‘what am I going to do?’ You also need to provide a rationale for your proposed research and to justify this. Your reader will be looking for some evidence that this is a topic in which you have sufficient interest to sustain the effort that will be required from you over the period of the research project. This may relate to the need to tackle a problem, to your intellectual curiosity, or to your intended career direction. It relates to the question, ‘why am I going to do this?’

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02

How can your research proposal be structured?

The rationale will also need to address the question, ‘why is it worth doing?’ This will relate to one of the following types of justification: the application of a theory to a particular context (such as within an organisation); the development of a theory within a research setting; testing a theory within a given context. Your research may propose other such justifications depending on its nature.

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How can your research proposal be structured?

This leads to another function of this section: to demonstrate ‘how my research relates to what has been done before in this subject area’. In achieving this you will show your knowledge of relevant literature and clarify where your proposal fits into the debate in this literature.

You will also be able to begin to show ‘which theory or theories will inform what I am doing and how I will use it or them’. The intention will be not to write a detailed review of the literature but rather to provide an overview of key literature sources from which you will draw and the theory or theories within them.

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02

How can your research proposal be structured?

Research question(s), aim and objectives

The Background section should lead logically into a statement of your research question(s), aim and research objectives.

These should leave the reader in no doubt about what your research seeks to achieve. Be careful here to ensure that your objectives are precisely written and will lead to observable outcomes.

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02

How can your research proposal be structured?

Method

The Background and Method will be the longest sections of your proposal. The Method is designed to answer the question, 'how shall I conduct my research?' The Method may be divided into sub-sections that deal with research design, participants, techniques and procedures and ethical considerations.

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02

How can your research proposal be structured?

Timescale

It is very useful to divide your research project into its constituent stages or tasks. You may estimate the amount of time that each stage or task should take to complete. Allocating each stage or task so much time should help you and your tutor decide on the feasibility of the research project, by giving you a clear idea as to what needs to be achieved during the time allowed. Experience shows that however well the researcher's time is organised, the whole process seems to take longer than anticipated. Devising a timescale allows you to monitor your progress and indicates where you need to allocate more working hours to keep up with your intended schedule.

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How can your research proposal be structured?

References

It is not necessary to try to impress your proposal reader with an enormous list of references. A few key literature sources to which you have referred in the background section and which relate to the previous work and theory that directly informs your own proposal, as well as references to the methods literature, should be all that is necessary.



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Thank You

