

MBA Research Methodology

Introduction to the notes

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The notes which accompany this introduction are intended to help you to develop the necessary knowledge and skills for successful completion of your MBA dissertation by introducing you to key aspects of research methodology. They are delivered in lecture format to the full time MBA students at the University of Leicester Management Centre. However, MSc Marketing students and MSc Finance distance learning students will also find these notes helpful, as the advice given here is relevant to dissertation research in these courses as well. You should read these notes alongside the electronic version of Blaxter, L., Hughes, C. and Tight, M. (2001) *How To Research*, second edition, Buckingham: Open University Press and the relevant Project Guidelines for the Dissertation for your degree. These are all available on this Blackboard site. You should also use the site to ask ULMC tutors any questions which are not covered in this material, the Blaxter *et al.* text or the Project Guidelines, or to clear up any areas of uncertainty. However, tutors may direct you to aspects of these notes, the Blaxter *et al.* text or the Project Guidelines in answering your questions.

The notes are organized in the same format as the full time MBA Research Methodology course. The sections in ordinary typeface are what appears in lecture notes distributed to these students, and the sections in italics are what the tutor actually says to students in lectures, so that they are able to take notes. Obviously not every aspect of these notes will be relevant to every MBA, MSc Marketing or MSc Finance distance learning student when preparing their dissertations, as all dissertations are different. So you will have to decide for yourselves which bits you need for your own research. Nonetheless, our advice is that you start by reading **all** of the notes, alongside the relevant chapters from Blaxter *et al.*, in order to familiarize yourself with methodology as a subject area when beginning to work on your research proposal and of course preparing the dissertation itself. This should assist you to make the appropriate choices for your own work. The notes will also give full references to other texts as appropriate throughout. In addition, please be aware that cross-references within and across the nine topic areas will be made as appropriate, and that material may be initially introduced and then developed in more detail at a later stage according to the structure of the notes themselves.

To begin with though, what is research methodology? The straightforward answer is that it is an overall action plan for research. Methodology is the logic or series of steps that connects a given set of research questions (uncertainties or gaps in our knowledge about the social world, about human behaviour) to the conclusions arrived at. It encompasses the selection of research methods, the design of data gathering instruments like interview or self-administered questionnaire schedules, gaining access to the research site, sampling, research ethics and data analysis. Academic standards exist on what constitutes good research, and these notes should assist you in familiarizing yourself with these standards so you are able to justify your

methodological choices to your assessors, gather meaningful, relevant, credible, trustworthy and plausible data which will answer your research questions and undertake your dissertation research in an ethical way.

There are many and varied methodologies in the social sciences¹ and it would be impossible to cover all of these in a set of notes like these. Instead we will be exploring issues related to the ones which, based on ULMC experience, most postgraduate students of management use. For those of you who do not find the specific methodology which you would like to use covered here, this will be discussed in detail in a range of the available texts, details of which follow.

The notes begin with an introduction to research and the MBA dissertation. Then, given that our understanding of the nature of human/ social reality and the possibilities of gathering knowledge relating to that reality have an inevitable impact on the research questions that we choose to pose and how we go about answering them, they consider the contested status of knowledge in the social sciences. This will be followed by discussion of the role and development of a literature review in research; the formulation of research questions; choosing, sampling for, designing and administering specific research methods; planning research; gaining access to research sites; research ethics; analysing different types of data; and writing up your dissertation. As many examples as possible will be given to illustrate how the issues raised are visible in real-life social science/ management research, and exercises will be included at various points.

Methodology as understood here therefore has to do with the practicalities of putting together an *empirical* piece of research. 'Empirical' comes from the Greek *empeiria*, meaning "knowledge based on experience and observation" (Gummesson, 2000: 64). In the social sciences, it refers to research which uses real-world data, which bases its conclusions on findings about people's actual behaviour and activities, as opposed to engaging in abstract theorizing, reflection and conceptualization. In practice though it is not always easy to draw the line between empirical projects (which can involve the analysis of secondary data – which someone else has collected - as well as primary data – which the researcher collects themselves) and what are sometimes referred to as 'theoretical', 'library' or 'desk-based' projects, where the researcher focuses on an evaluation or synthesis of the existing literature in a particular subject area/s. This is because 'theoretical' projects often involve the analysis of existing empirical studies – and thus the use of secondary data. And we should not forget that the analysis of any form of data, whether primary or

¹ Natural sciences study the behaviour of natural phenomena like plants, animals, natural forces and natural elements – they include biology, physics and chemistry. The social sciences study human behaviour, and therefore management is a social science. Please also note the term 'management' is used in these notes as a generic term to refer to the series of subjects, theories, techniques and concepts which you as MBA, Marketing and Finance students are studying.

secondary, should always involve reference to existing concepts and theories – so empirical projects also need to make considerable use of theory!

In these notes, however, we will focus on *primary* empirical research for the following reasons:

- a) again, ULMC experience shows that the majority of postgraduate students of management undertake empirical studies, usually involving the collection of primary data of some sort;
- b) even if you choose to engage in a 'pure' library project or to analyse secondary data only for your dissertation, you may well be asked to conduct primary empirical research in the future, either as part of future academic work or in a career outside academia;
- c) a grounding in primary empirical research methodology is always helpful in terms of evaluating claims made by others on the basis of their data-gathering activities (ie, in terms of evaluating published management research); and
- d) it is impossible to cover the full range of available methodologies, as already suggested, in notes like these.

Moreover, many of the issues (eg, conceptualizing social science knowledge, developing a literature review, formulating research questions, data analysis and writing up your dissertation) that we discuss during the notes will in any case be directly relevant to those doing more theoretical projects and/ or dissertations involving the use of secondary data.

So, to summarize, these notes, accompanied by the Blaxter *et al.* text, aim to:

1. draw your attention to the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning social science research;
2. outline the use of existing literature in social science research and ways to formulate research questions;
3. identify key issues around choosing, sampling for, designing and administering the most commonly used empirical research methods in postgraduate management research;
4. discuss approaches to analysing quantitative and qualitative data;
5. develop skills required for planning a dissertation, accessing a research site, reflecting on and justifying the choices made in your research design and writing the dissertation up; and
6. enhance your ability to evaluate published management research.

Having read these notes as well as the Blaxter *et al.* text and other relevant sources on methodology², you should be able to:

² These notes, as suggested, will not tell you all you need to know about your own dissertation research - so it is essential that you do as much independent reading as possible both for your dissertation proposal and for the dissertation itself. You will also need to read a wide range of the subject-specific literature of course – ie, published research on your area of interest, whether it is organizational structure, Total Quality Management, organizational culture, relationship marketing, charismatic leadership, stress, productivity, employee motivation, the efficient market hypothesis, the supply chain, auditing or whatever else.

1. demonstrate a practical understanding of social science research methodology and the choices, assumptions and difficulties involved in carrying out such research;
2. conduct your own dissertation, defend the choices you have made in that regard and derive credible and relevant conclusions from your research; and
3. reflect on and critique published management research.

Please also be aware that terminology in research methodology, like many other areas of the study of management, is not used consistently. So authors might use different terms to describe the same thing or (even more confusingly) the same term to describe different things. Be aware of this when you are reading these notes and the relevant texts.

The structure of the notes

Topics 1 and 2:	Research and the MBA dissertation Conceptualizing social science knowledge
Topics 3 and 4:	The role of existing literature in social science research Formulating research questions
Topic 5:	Quantitative and qualitative methods – a selective review
Topic 6:	Research planning, access and ethics
Topic 7:	Analysing quantitative data
Topic 8:	Analysing qualitative data
Topic 9:	Writing up your dissertation

Additional references

This list provides details of research methodology texts which have been selected to represent a wide-ranging sample of what is available. Several are specifically written for management students. Others focus on particular aspects of or approaches in research methodology. Many of these texts will be referred to in the notes. We are providing this list for those of you who need to extend your knowledge of a particular topic.

- Alvesson, M. and Deetz, S. (2000) *Doing Critical Management Research*, London: Sage.
- Bell, J. (1999) *Doing Your Research Project*, third edition, Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Bloor, M., Franklin, J., Thomas, M. and Robson, K. (2000) *Focus Groups in Social Research*, London: Sage.
- Brewerton, P. and Millward, L. (2001) *Organizational Research Methods*, London: Sage.
- Bryman, A. (2001) *Quality and Quantity in Social Research*, London: Routledge.

Bryman, A. (2001) *Social Research Methods*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bryman, A. and Bell, E. (2003) *Business Research Methods*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bryman, A. and Burgess, R. (1999) (eds) *Qualitative Research*, four volume set, London: Sage.

Cassell, C. and Symon, G. (eds) (2004) *Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organizational Research*, London: Sage.

Chisnall, P. (2004) *Marketing Research*, seventh edition, London: McGraw Hill.

Collis, J. and Hussey, R. (2003) *Business Research: A Practical Guide for Undergraduate and Postgraduate Students*, second edition, Basingstoke: Macmillan Business.

Corbetta, P. (2003) *Social Research: Theories, Methods and Techniques*, London: Sage.

Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (2003) (eds) *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*, second edition, Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (2003) (eds) *The Landscape of Qualitative Research*, second edition, Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (2003) (eds) *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*, second edition, Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

Easterby-Smith, M., Thorpe, R. and Lowe, A. (2002) *Management Research: An Introduction*, second edition, London: Sage.

Ghauri, P. and Gronhaug, K (2002) *Research Methods in Business Studies: A Practical Guide*, second edition, Harlow, Essex: Financial Times Prentice Hall.

Griseri, P. (2002) *Management Knowledge: A Critical View*, Basingstoke: Palgrave,

Gummesson, E. (2000) *Qualitative Methods and Management Research*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hewson, C., Yule, P., Laurent, D. and Vogel, C. (2002) *Internet Research Methods: A Guide for the Social and Behavioural Sciences*, London: Sage.

Jankowicz, A.D. (2005) *Business Research Projects*, fourth edition, London: Thomson Learning.

Johnson, P. and Duberley, J. (2000) *Understanding Management Research*, London: Sage.

Krueger, R.A. and Casey, M.A. (2000) *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*, third edition, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

May, T. (2001) *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process*, third edition, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Miller, R.L. and Brewer, J.D. (2003) *The A-Z of Social Research: A Dictionary of Key Social Science Research Concepts*, London: Sage

Morris, C. (2002) *Quantitative Approaches in Business Studies*, sixth edition, Harlow, Essex: Financial Times Prentice Hall.

Ó Dochartaigh, N. (2002) *The Internet Research Handbook: A Practical Guide for Students and Researchers in the Social Sciences*, London: Sage.

Potter, S. (ed.) (2002) *Doing Postgraduate Research*, London: Sage.

Remenyi, D., Williams, B., Money, A. and Swartz, E. (1998) *Doing Research in Business and Management: An Introduction to Process and Method*, London: Sage.

Renzetti, C.M. and Lee, R.M. (eds) (1993) *Researching Sensitive Topics*, London: Sage.

- Easterby-Smith, M., Lowe, R. and Thorpe, A. (2002) *Management Research: An Introduction*, second edition, London: Sage.
- Robson, C. (2002) *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers*, second edition, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Rubin, H.J. and Rubin, I.S. (2004) *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, second edition, London: Sage.
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (2003) *Research Methods for Business Students*, third edition, Harlow: Financial Times Prentice Hall.
- Seale, C., Gobo, G., Gubrium, J.F. and Silverman, D. (2004) (eds) *Qualitative Research Practice*, London: Sage.
- Silverman, D. (2001) *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction*, second edition, London: Sage.
- Silverman, D. (2004) *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*, second edition, London: Sage.
- Silverman, D. (ed.) (2004) *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice*, second edition, London: Sage.
- Smith, M.J. (1998) *Social Science in Question*, London: Sage in association with Open University Press.
- Taylor, S. (2002) *Ethnographic Research: A Reader*, London: Sage.
- Thietart, R-A (ed.) (2001) *Doing Management Research: A Comprehensive Guide*, London: Sage.
- Thomas, R. (1997) *Quantitative Methods for Business Studies*, Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall.
- Yin, R.K. (2003) *Applications of Case Study Research*, second edition, Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Yin, R.K. (2003) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, third edition, Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Wood, M. (2003) *Making Sense of Statistics: A Non-Mathematical Approach*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave.

Finally, you should also note that there are several academic journals devoted to issues around research (eg, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Qualitative Inquiry* and *Qualitative Research*), as well as some focusing specifically on management research (eg, *Journal of Management Inquiry* and *Organizational Research Methods*).

Now please continue by reading the notes on Topics 1 and 2.