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PLANNING THE PROJECT

Selecting a topic

Selecting a topic is more difficult than it at first seems. With limited time at your disposal there is a temptation to select a topic before the groundwork has been done, but try to resist the temptation. Prepare well and you will save time later. Your discussions and inquiries will help you to select a topic which is likely to be of interest, which you have a good chance of completing, which will be worth the effort and which may even have some practical application later on.

Many researchers in areas such as education, social science and health are directly concerned with the practical outcomes of research and in particular, the improvement of practice in their organization. The aim is not only 'to know facts and to understand relations for the sake of knowledge. We want to know and understand in order to be able to act and act "better" than we did before' (Langeveld 1965: 4).

This is not to deny the importance of research which may have no immediate practical outcome. Eggleston provides a timely reminder of the importance of longer-term objectives and of the need to look beyond current practices. To restrict research to current practices would, in his opinion, lay it 'open to the charge that its sole function was to increase the efficiency of the existing

system in terms of accepted criteria and deny it the opportunity to explore potentially more effective alternatives' (Eggleston 1979: 5).

Clearly the need to explore potentially more effective alternatives to existing provision will always exist. After 100 hours of study, you are unlikely to be in a position to make recommendations for fundamental change in any system. However, whatever the size and scope of the study, you will in all cases be required to analyse and evaluate the information you collect and in some cases, you might then be in a position to suggest desirable changes in practice.

Discuss possible practical outcomes with your supervisor and ask whether the department has any guidelines for the selection of topics and the preparation of research briefs. Consider what the emphasis of your study is to be. Is applicability to be important or is your study to have different aims?

Getting started



You may be given a topic to research, but in most cases you will be asked to select a topic from a list or to decide on a topic yourself. You may have an idea or a particular area of interest that you would like to explore. You may have several ideas, all equally interesting. Write them down:

Something to do with mature students?
Stress at work?
The effectiveness (or otherwise) of the research methods/introduction to computing/ introduction to the library course?
Supervision of research projects?
Supervision of placements?

These are all possible topics but before a decision can be made about which to select, some work needs to be done. Think about what might be involved in each one and which will be likely to maintain your interest. If you become bored with a topic, the time will drag unmercifully and the likelihood is that the quality of your research will suffer. Talk to colleagues and friends about your

initial ideas. They may be aware of sensitive aspects of certain topics which could cause difficulties at some stage or they may know of other people who have carried out research in one or more of your topics who would be willing to talk to you. If you are hoping to carry out the research in your own institution, then another very good reason for discussing possible topics with colleagues is that you will probably be asking for their support and collaboration: early consultation is essential if you are to avoid difficulties later.

Try to bring the list down to a possible two – one likely to be of main interest and the second to fall back on if your preliminary investigations throw up problems. Let's say you decide you would be particularly interested in a mature students topic, but that stress comes a close second. It will have become clear to you that 'something to do with mature students' requires more focussing before you can proceed. So far, you have been thinking in general terms but now you need to start the process of trying out ideas and asking yourself questions.

Start with your first choice (mature students) and begin to write down your ideas on a sheet of A4 paper. I say A4 rather than the back of an envelope because you will need space. Write 'mature students' in the middle of the paper and link to it all the questions, doubts, theories and ideas you can think of. Brainstorm it. Insert arrows, if necessary, to link one idea or query with another. Write quickly and write as you think. If you decide to wait until your thoughts are in better order, you may (and probably will) have forgotten what you thought of first. It doesn't matter how illegible and disorganized your chart is as long as you can read your own writing. This first shot is for you, not other people.

The purpose of this exercise is to help you to clarify your thoughts and to try to decide what you actually *mean* by each statement and each question. It will give you ideas about refining the topic so that you will not be attempting to do research into everything there is to know about mature students, but into one precise aspect of the topic. It will give you clues as to whether this topic is likely to be too complex for you to complete in your timescale, or whether it might prove to be impossible because you would need access to confidential information which in all probability would be refused.

Your first shot will be a mess but that doesn't matter. Your second attempt will be far more focussed and you will be on the way to making a fairly firm decision about which aspect of your topic you wish to investigate. Incidentally, don't throw away your first or your second attempt/s until after your research is complete, examined and/or your work is published. You may need to refer to first shots and early drafts at some stage so start a 'reject' or a 'dump' file.

Consider your priorities. For example, if you have decided that you would be interested in investigating barriers to learning among mature undergraduates, draw together the various items on your first and second thoughts charts into a list of questions on your selected topics, eliminating overlaps or rejects, and adding any other thoughts which occur to you as you write. At this stage, the order and wording are not important. You are on the way.

Start with the purpose of the study. It might be difficult at this stage to provide the exact wording but it's rather important to know why you want to carry out this research. Think about it. Write down your ideas. Ask yourself questions and make a note of any prompts about the likely sub questions. Be critical. *The purpose of this is study is* . . . What?

- *to identify any barriers to learning for mature students?* Meaning of barriers'? Why do I need this information and how will I find it? Ask students? Ask a sample of students who started their degree course straight from school for comparison? Any differences? Any differences between mature students who experienced no barriers and those who did?
- *to identify any differences between the performance of mature and younger students?* How judged? Degree classification of former students? Should need access to statistics. Any data protection issues?

Each question raises other issues. Ask yourself:

- *What do institutions mean by 'mature'? What do I mean by 'mature' and 'older'?* Have to think of synonyms for 'mature'. Over 21, 25, 30, 60? Age at registration? Age at graduation?

Need to get this sorted. How will I find out? Will I be given access to records?

- *Which mature students?* Those who graduated since the university was established? In the last three years? All students in the university, in one department, in one subject area, one group? Need to think.
- *Which institutions/faculties/departments/groups are to be included in this investigation?* Need to ask supervisor's advice about how to go about obtaining permission. Is one institution/department/subject area/group sufficient – or feasible? Would it be acceptable for me to concentrate on mature students on my course?
- *Has any research been done already on this topic?* Need to get to the library to see what has already been written about mature students and see what those researchers did about the definition of 'mature' – and other things.

These questions will give you and your supervisor or tutor some idea of where you are heading. You're still at the *what* stage (the *how* stage comes later), but each stage continues to be a process of refining and clarifying so that you end with a list of questions, tasks or objectives which you can ask, perform or examine. These will become what Laws et al. (2003:97) describe as **researchable questions** which will take you a major step forward in the planning of your project.

Hypotheses, objectives and researchable questions

Many research projects begin with the statement of a hypothesis, defined by Verma and Beard as

> A tentative proposition which is subject to verification through subsequent investigation. It may also be seen as the guide to the researcher in that it depicts and describes the method to be followed in studying the problem. In many cases hypotheses are hunches that the researcher has about the existence of relationship between variables.
>
> (Verma and Beard 1981: 184)

This definition is taken a step further by Medawar, who writes:

> All advances in scientific understanding, at every level, begin with a speculative adventure, an imaginative preconception *of what might be true* – a preconception which always, and necessarily, goes a little way (sometimes a long way) beyond anything which we have logical or factual authority to believe in. It is the invention of a possible world, or of a tiny fraction of that world. The conjecture is then exposed to criticism to find out whether or not that imagined world is anything like the real one. Scientific reasoning is therefore at all levels an interaction between two episodes of thought – a dialogue between two voices, the one imaginative and the other critical; a dialogue, if you like, between the possible and the actual, between proposal and disposal, conjecture and criticism, between what might be true and what is in fact the case.
>
> (Medawar 1972: 22)

So, hypotheses make statements about relations between variables and provide a guide to the researcher as to how the original hunch might be tested. If we hypothesize, because our conjecture suggests it may be so, that age (one variable) has an influence on degree results (another variable), then we can attempt to find out whether that is so – at least amongst the subjects in our sample. The results of the research will either *support* the hypothesis (that age does have an influence on degree results) or will *not* support it (age has no influence on degree results). As Denscombe points out,

> the possibility of proof/disproof is built into the whole notion of an hypothesis. It takes the form 'if (theory X) is true, then (under conditions Y) we might expect to find (result X)'. The test of the hypothesis 'If . . . then . . .' lies in finding (or not finding) the expected outcome.
>
> (Denscombe 2002: 31)

Small-scale projects of the kind discussed in this book will not require statistical testing of hypotheses often required in

large-scale sample surveys. Unless your supervisor advises otherwise, a precise statement of objectives and a list of researchable questions are generally quite sufficient. The important point is not so much whether there is a hypothesis, but whether you have carefully thought about what is, and what is not worth investigating. It may be permissible to make modifications to objectives or changes to the questions as the study proceeds, but that does not obviate the necessity of identifying exactly what you plan to do at the outset. Until that stage has been achieved, it is not possible to consider appropriate methods of data collection, so now's the time to check the following items.

Working title and the project outline



Select a **working title**. 'Barriers to learning', or 'Mature students'? Either will do for the time being. You're almost ready to produce the project outline for discussion with your supervisor, but just go through the stages once again:

- Are you clear about the *purpose of the study*? Are you sure about it? Do you think it's likely to be worth doing?
- Have you decided on the *focus of the study*?
- You have not yet *identified your sample*. Discussion with supervisor required and then permissions sought. You're not there yet.
- You've been through all your *key questions* (several times now) and know what your priorities are. There will almost certainly be adjustments as the research continues, but never mind.
- You have begun to consider *what information* you might need in order to be in a position to answer your questions. More work needed, but you've made a start.
- You have not yet begun to consider *how* you might obtain this information, but once the focussing is finished, you can begin to consider possible ways and means. Remember that you can't assume you will be allowed to interview people or give them a questionnaire to answer. You have to clear official channels and obtain permission.

There are still some decisions to be made, but you're ready to produce the first draft of your project outline for discussion with your supervisor. Before you do, think about your submission date. Think about *time*. What are your chances of completing your provisional plan in your allocated time? You are not going to be living in a cave with only a computer for company for the duration of your research, out of touch with work commitments, family responsibilities and holidays. They all need to be taken into account in your time plan. I make plans all the time and I live by the lists. I don't always succeed in keeping to them, but at least their presence is enough to remind me about what still needs to be done and to nag me when I am thinking about all the things I'd rather do than get back to the writing.

Timing

There is never enough time to do all the work that seems to be essential in order to do a thorough job, but if you have a handover date, then somehow the work has to be completed in the specified time. It is unlikely you will be able to keep rigidly to a timetable, but some attempt should be made to devise a schedule so that you can check progress periodically and, if necessary, force yourself to move from one stage of the research to the next.

If you have to complete more than one project in the year, it is particularly important to produce a list or a chart indicating the stage at which all data should have been collected, analysed and drafts produced. Delay on one project means that the timing for the second and third will be upset. It is immaterial whether you produce a list *or* a chart, but some attempt at planning progress should be attempted.

One of the most common reasons for falling behind is that reading takes longer than anticipated. Books and articles have to be located, and the temptation to read just one more book is strong. At some stage a decision has to be made to stop reading and start writing, no matter how inadequate the coverage of the subject is. Forcing yourself to move on is a discipline that has to be learnt. Keep in touch with your supervisor about progress. If things go wrong and you are held up on one stage, there may be

other ways of overcoming the problem. Talk about it. Ask for help and advice *before* you become weeks out of phase with your timetable, so that you have a chance of amending your original project plan. The project outline is for guidance only. If subsequent events indicate that it would be better to ask different questions and even to have a different aim, then change while there is time. You have to work to the date specified by the institution, and your supervisor and external examiner will understand that.

Supervision

I can't emphasize enough the importance of establishing a good working relationship with your supervisor. Few researchers, inexperienced *and* experienced, can go it alone and expect to produce quality research. There are exceptions of course. Aren't there always? Somebody told me once about a PhD student who made it clear that he did not need a supervisor and had no intention of attending any research tutorials. He was advised that this would be very unwise and that his chances of succeeding without support were very slight. He persisted and eventually submitted a thesis which proved to be a work of outstanding quality and depth. His external examiner had no doubt in recommending that it was a clear pass. There is a problem with this approach, namely that few people can aspire to such single-mindedness and brilliance. Most of us really do need a supervisor in whom we have confidence, with whom we can share our thinking, who is willing to advise and to give an honest view about our drafts, and that applies regardless of whether we are working on a 100-hour project, an undergraduate or a postgraduate degree.

Student–supervisor relationships

I have occasionally heard students complain that they are getting a raw deal from their supervisors, and in some cases they may have been right – though not always. Supervisors are only human. Most will also be lecturing, supervising other students and carrying out their own research. Time is generally in short

supply and some friends who are heavily committed with supervision have suggested to me that I give the impression that they should be available at all hours to see students on demand who might wish to discuss any aspect of their work, regardless of the time of day, the time involved and the frequency of such requests. Not so. A reasonable balance has to be struck, though I realize that the big question is what 'reasonable' means to both sides.

Perhaps not surprisingly, interviews with students and with supervisors reveal a wide variation in supervisory practice (Bell 1996; Phillips and Pugh 2000). The majority of students appear to have enjoyed very positive relationships with supervisors. Their comments were on the lines of 'very helpful'; 'taught me what research was all about'; 'could not have done this without her'; 'he made me believe I could do it, saw me through the bad times, read all my drafts carefully, was straight about what I had written and what more needed to be done'. However, when things went wrong, they went badly wrong, and students' comments were on the lines of 'could never get hold of him'; 'never returned my calls'; 'made me feel inadequate'; 'showed no signs of having read my drafts'; 'didn't seem to feel he had any responsibility for advising about my approach'; 'was only willing to see me once a term for a timetabled 20 minutes. He was always late but always finished on time. I had to travel 100 miles for these 10 minute meetings'; and 'went on study leave, never told me, and no-one was allocated to "take me over" at a crucial time in my research when I really needed help'.

Some of the supervisors put up a vigorous defence. Regular telephone calls at 11 p.m. or later in spite of repeated requests not to telephone after 9 p.m. so exasperated one supervisor that he refused to release his home telephone number to his next batch of tutees. There were complaints about students not turning up for arranged meetings; demands for drafts to be read overnight; the assumption that supervisors should always be in their room and available for consultation whenever they were needed, and so on.

The point of raising these issues here is not to lay blame one way or the other but rather to consider ways of avoiding conflict if at all possible, and, only if reason does not prevail, to consider ways of resolving difficult situations.

Codes of practice for supervision

All universities now have (or should have) a code of practice for supervision. However, providing such a code is one thing, and ensuring that everyone involved follows the guidelines may be quite another. You should certainly be able to see your university's or organization's code in order to know what your and your supervisor's rights and responsibilities are. Some universities automatically provide a copy for students; others do not.

Most codes advise that supervisors and students should at an early stage clarify what 'supervision' actually means and what it is reasonable for both to expect. Even where efforts are made to clarify rights and responsibilities, supervisor–student relationships do occasionally break down and if all efforts to improve the position fail, then the only thing to do is to request a change before depression and a feeling of hopelessness take over.

Change of supervisor

Achieving a satisfactory change may not always be as easy as it might seem. One part-time student who was not getting on with her supervisor was desperate to change but the department was unable to find another supervisor who was willing to accept her. Having drawn a blank after following all the laid-down procedures, she decided to take action herself. She stood at the door of the postgraduate students' common room one lunch time and shouted 'Is anybody here doing historical research?' When several hands went up, she asked what they thought of their supervisors and what their specialisms were. In desperation, she pleaded for an interview with the supervisor deemed by his students to be 'friendly, helpful, knowledgeable but tough' who eventually, though somewhat reluctantly, agreed to take her on. They got on well and three years later she trod he boards to receive her PhD. Her advice to students in a similar position was:

> If you have justifiable concerns, talk about them and try to sort them informally. If that approach fails, go through

> the formal channels. In my case, neither approach produced the desired changes so I decided I had to take matters into my own hands. I didn't like doing what I did but I would never have completed with the first supervisor. He seemed to leave me feeling that I wasn't intellectually up to the research.

Most of the time, everything works well and supervisors are as anxious as their students that they should succeed, but if things go badly wrong, state your case clearly and fairly and don't give in.

Keeping records of supervisory tutorials

I firmly believe that records of supervisory tutorials should be kept by supervisors *and* by research students. Many of my colleagues disagree and claim this would be 'just another piece of unnecessary bureaucracy'. I am not speaking here of a large document which would require days, if not weeks to produce but a one-page pre-printed form which gives space for the date of the tutorial, a (very) brief note of issues discussed, targets set, if any, summary of comments given on drafts and on the general progress of the research, advice given and taken (or not taken) and the proposed date of the next meeting. Five minutes maximum at the end of the tutorial with a copy for the supervisor and for the student. This provides a useful record and reminder for both about what was said, promised and agreed (or disagreed) and acts as a log of progress. However, it now also serves another purpose. Disputes have increased and it is in the interests of supervisors and students that there should be such an agreed record. Keeping records is not just another attempt at imposing yet another level of useless bureaucracy. It is good professional practice. If your supervisor considers such a record is unnecessary, keep your own.

The research experience

The supervisor–student relationship at its best will ensure that your research experience will be demanding, but will also be

valuable, enjoyable and will result in the successful completion of your investigation – on time. As I have suggested earlier, only isolationist geniuses with plenty of time and a first-class library at their disposal are likely to succeed – and there are not many geniuses around. Most of us need help, encouragement and supervisor expertise. As many first-time and experienced researchers have testified, a good supervisor is like gold dust, and by far the most valuable resource we have.

Planning the project checklist

1 Draw up a shortlist of topics.	Talk to colleagues, fellow students – anyone who will listen. Consult library catalogues, but briefly.
2 Decide on a shortlist of two.	Select your first choice and keep the second in mind in case your first choice proves to be too difficult or too uninteresting.
3 Make a list of first- and second-thoughts questions or produce a chart of ideas, thoughts, possible problems – anything you can think of.	This is for your eyes only. The purpose is to help you to clarify your thoughts about which aspects of the topic are of particular interest or importance.
4 Select the precise focus of your study.	You can't do everything, so you need to be clear about which aspect of the general topic you wish to investigate. Is your topic likely to be worth investigating? Think about it. The last thing you want is to be stuck with a topic that's going nowhere and which bores you to distraction.
5 Make sure you are clear about the purpose of the study.	Give some thought to your sample. You need to consult your supervisor about which individuals or groups might be included.

6	Go back to your charts and lists of questions, delete any items which do not relate to your selected topic, add others which do, eliminate overlap and produce a revised list of key questions.	You are aiming to produce **researchable questions.** Watch your language! Are you absolutely clear about the *meaning* of the words you use. Words can mean different things to different people.
7	Draw up an initial project outline. Check that you are clear about the purpose and focus of your study, have identified key questions, know what information you will require and have thought about how you might obtain it.	Check your submission date. Do you have enough time to carry out the research you have outlined – and to submit on time?
8	Consult your supervisor at the stage of selecting a topic and after drawing up a project outline.	You don't want to get too far down the research road before you check that all is well. Make sure you discuss a suitable sample and ask about who to approach for permissions.
9	It's best to know about your institution's code of practice for supervision and what to do if the relationship with your supervisor breaks down.	Do your best to clarify any unclear areas of supervisor/ student rights and responsibilities.
10	Keep a brief record of what has been discussed, and agreed, in supervisory tutorials.	It will help to remind you about what tasks and targets have been agreed.
11	Remember that a good supervisor is like gold dust and by far the most valuable resource you have, so don't make unreasonable demands. If you're asked not to phone after 9 p.m. because granny goes to bed at that time and the telephone disturbs her, please make sure you don't.	Unfortunately, very occasionally supervisor–student relationships break down. If you have justifiable concerns, try to talk about them and to sort out problems. If that fails, go through formal channels, state your case clearly and fairly and, if that fails, request a change.

12	From the start of your research, get into the habit of writing everything down.	And don't throw away your drafts until your investigation has been submitted, assessed and/or published. You never know when you might need to refer to them.

Further reading

Cryer, P. (2000) *The Research Student's Guide to Success*, 2nd edn. Buckingham: Open University Press. Considers the roles and responsibilities of supervisors *and* of research students and provides guidance about what to do if things do not go well.

Delamont, S., Atkinson, P. and Parry, O. (2004) *Supervising the Doctorate: A Guide to Success*. Buckingham: Open University Press. This is a book written for supervisors, but it is full of helpful ideas and advice for students also.

Johnson, D. (1994) 'Planning small-scale research', Chapter 12 in N. Bennett, R. Glatter, R. Levačić (eds) *Improving Educational Management through Research and Consultancy*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing, in association with the Open University. This excellent chapter covers research planning, stages of carrying out an investigation, establishing the focus of a study, identifying the specific objectives of a study, arranging research access, developing the research instruments, collecting the data – and much more.

Laws, S. with Harper, C. and Marcus, R. (2003) *Research for Development: A Practical Guide*. London: Sage. Chapter 5 provides guidance about processes involved in planning research, writing the brief, defining the research process, setting the research questions and hypothesis testing. A useful checklist and list of further reading are provided. Well worth consulting.

Wolcott, H.F. (2001) *Writing up Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn. London: Sage Publications. Everything Wolcott has written is worth reading, his advice is excellent and if you can get hold of this second edition, read it all! He is particularly good, as the title of this book indicates, about writing but also about planning. He talks about his own practice, what he considers researchers should and should not do – and he can be funny at times. It all helps.