

PREFACE TO THE FOURTH EDITION

The first edition of this book was written as a result of the accumulated experience of teaching research methods to undergraduate and postgraduate students in British and overseas universities and of writing distance learning materials for the British Open University and the University of Sheffield. Now, there are many good books on research methods on the market, but at that time, I had been unable to find one which quite covered the basic principles involved in planning research, but which was also an easy read and which made no assumptions about students' previous knowledge of research. *Doing Your Research Project* was intended to be a confidence builder, a starter book to provide new researchers with the necessary skills and techniques which would enable them to move on to more complex tasks and reading. I am told that it is now a set book for many undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

All the techniques and procedures described in the first edition were well tried and tested, but there are always ways of doing things better. The experience of teaching and supervising research students, and working through some of the procedures and techniques in research methods workshops suggested alternative approaches and the desirability of providing additional material. These were incorporated into the second edition in 1993, the third edition in 1999 and now further changes have become necessary for this fourth edition.

When the first edition was published in 1987, relatively few students were skilled in information technology (IT) and only the most advanced libraries provided general access to computer search facilities. By the time the second and third editions were published, times had changed so it became necessary to provide new material on access to libraries, search techniques, locating published materials, computer databases and the Internet. Other changes in this edition include more examples of research in a wider range of disciplines, additions to checklists and to further reading lists. All chapters in this edition have been updated and rewritten and new chapters have been included on ethical research, literature searching and literature reviews. However, the basic structure remains much the same as in the first, second and third editions.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have been helped throughout the preparation of all four editions of this book by the interest of friends and colleagues who have given strong support in difficult times. I have been particularly grateful to Dr Ann Hanson and friends and former students from The Open University, Professor William Hoff, Emeritus Professor at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST) and to Dr Clive Opie, Deputy Head of the Northern Institute of Education at the Manchester Metropolitan University who all read drafts of this fourth edition, commented and made suggestions for changes. They were a great help.

I have particularly welcomed comments from research students who kindly (and sometimes gleefully) pointed out that they had found better ways of doing things than I suggested in the first three editions. I have been happy to incorporate their suggestions.

My continuing thanks to Michael Youngman, formerly of the University of Nottingham, who devised the question types in Chapter 8, which have eased the burden of many research students who are in the early days of designing questionnaires and interpreting the results. The generous assistance and support he invariably gave to many struggling PhD students, including me, made the difference between our dropping out altogether and actually finishing. My thanks also to Brendan Duffy and Stephen Waters, two outstanding Open University research students who

carried out investigations into aspects of educational management in their own institutions and developed a considerable degree of expertise in research methods in the process. Both generously allowed me to use some of their ideas and experiences. Brendan, who already held a PhD in History before he embarked on research into education management wrote 'The analysis of documentary evidence' in the earlier editions of this book and has extended and updated Chapter 7 for this edition.

I am grateful to Clara Nai and Gilbert Fan, Singaporean-based former postgraduate students of the University of Sheffield, who kindly permitted me to quote parts of their MEd literature reviews in Chapter 6 and to John Richardson and Alan Woodley, both of the British Open University, for permission to quote from their journal article 'Another look at the role of age, gender and subject as predictors of academic attainment in higher education' (Richardson and Woodley 2003). My thanks also to Janette Gray of Edith Cowan University in Western Australia for providing material for the section on narrative inquiry in Chapter 1. Her enthusiasm for and knowledge of this approach encouraged me to read further but also to begin to understand what is involved in narrative inquiry. I am similarly grateful to Katie Horne, once a first-time researcher herself but now a professional researcher. She kindly produced her Top Ten Guide to Searching the Internet at short notice, which is included in Chapter 5.

Friends and colleagues have been particularly helpful in arranging for me to have access to several excellent small specialist libraries which are not normally open to outsiders. Linda Mealing, friend, nurse and first-time researcher very kindly introduced me to the librarians and the Director of Research of St Ann's Hospice in Stockport and opened my eyes to the extent of ongoing research into palliative care. Thanks also to the librarians in other specialist libraries who allowed me to consult their library catalogue and the range of journals on the shelves even though I did not have a library card. I was not always so fortunate, so no thanks at all to the few librarians who curtly refused to allow me through the door. Well, we can only ask.

Fred Bell did his best to sort out a new computer which was giving me unanticipated and ongoing grief, read all the scripts, drew attention to typographical and other errors, winced at what

he regarded as some of my oversimplifications, which I usually ignored, and generally pointed out the error of my ways, as always.

Finally, I should like to thank two people who have been closely involved with all editions of *Doing Your Research Project*, namely Chris Madden, the artist who produced the maze on the front cover of each edition and Shona Mullen, formerly Publishing Director at Open University Press who saw me safely through each edition with great patience and good humour. Over the years, we have become friends and selfishly, I am sorry her new position as General Manager at McGraw-Hill will mean that we shall not be directly associated with any further publications.

Chris Madden and I have never met, but I have been delighted to work with an artist who appears to have the same weird sense of humour as me, but who also has the skill to put these ideas into practice. He had the original idea of a maze for the front cover of the first edition. The development of the maze theme over the following three editions has given me, and I hope him, a good deal of fun over the years as we thought of new ideas for including examples of distraught researchers who were going down blind alleys, losing patience and wondering why they ever started on the research in the first place. In the third edition, I especially liked the image of the student kicking his computer. I've felt like doing that myself on numerous occasions, particularly recently. However, the overall image is of students who managed to negotiate the maze and, having overcome the difficulties experienced by all researchers, are seen to be leaving it deliriously happy, in academic dress, holding their diplomas on high, throwing their mortarboards in the air and going forth to do more and even better research.

To you all, my grateful thanks.



INTRODUCTION

This book is intended for those of you who are about to undertake research in connection with your job, or as a requirement for an undergraduate, certificate or postgraduate course.

Regardless of the topic or the discipline, the problems facing you are much the same whether you are working on a small project, a Master's or a PhD thesis. You will need to select a topic, identify the objectives of your study, plan and design a suitable methodology, devise research instruments, negotiate access to institutions, materials and people, collect, analyse and present information, and, finally, produce a well-written report. Whatever the size of the undertaking, techniques have to be mastered and a plan of action devised which does not attempt more than the limitations of expertise, time and access permit. Large-scale research projects will require sophisticated techniques and, often, statistical and computation expertise, but it is quite possible to produce a worthwhile study without using computers and with a minimum of statistical knowledge. We all learn how to do research by actually doing it, but a great deal of time can be wasted and goodwill dissipated by inadequate preparation. This book aims to provide you with the tools to do the job, to help you to avoid some of the pitfalls and time-consuming false trails that can eat into your time allowance, to establish good research habits and to take you from the stage of selecting a topic through to the

production of a well-planned, methodologically sound and well-written final report or thesis – ON TIME. There is, after all, little point in doing all the work if you never manage to submit. Throughout this book, I use the terms 'research', 'investigation', 'inquiry' and 'study' interchangeably, though I realize this is not acceptable to everyone. Some argue that 'research' is a more rigorous and technically more complicated form of investigation. Howard and Sharp discuss this issue in *The Management of a Student Research Project*:

> Most people associate the word 'research' with activities which are substantially removed from day-to-day life and which are pursued by outstandingly gifted persons with an unusual level of commitment. There is of course a good deal of truth in this viewpoint, but we would argue that the pursuit is not restricted to this type of person and indeed can prove to be a stimulating and satisfying experience for many people with a trained and enquiring mind.
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> (Howard and Sharp 1983: 6)

They define research as 'seeking through methodical processes to add to one's own body of knowledge and, hopefully, to that of others, by the discovery of non-trivial facts and insights' (p. 6).

Drew (1980) agrees that 'research is conducted to solve problems and to expand knowledge' (p. 4) and stresses that 'research is a systematic way of asking questions, a systematic method of enquiry' (p. 8). It is the systematic approach that is important in the conduct of your projects, not the title of 'research', 'inquiry' or 'study'. Where collection of data is involved (notes of interviews, questionnaire responses, articles, official reports, minutes of meetings, etc.), orderly record keeping and thorough planning are essential.

No book can take the place of a good supervisor, but good supervisors are in great demand, and if you can familiarize yourself with basic approaches and techniques, you will be able to make full use of your tutorial time for priority issues.

The examples given in the following chapters relate particularly to projects which have to be completed in two to three months

(what I have called the 100-hour projects), but I have been pleased to learn that numbers of Master's and PhD students have found them equally useful.