

2

Developing a research topic

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- understand the criteria that need to be considered when choosing a research topic;
- know what makes a good research topic;
- recognize how to develop research questions;
- recognize how to develop objectives;
- evaluate your own research questions; and
- understand the relationship between theory, research questions and objectives.

Introduction

The preceding chapter provided an introduction to business research. You are now ready to start thinking about your own research, in particular, your research topic. In business, a research topic is usually related to a particular organization and its respective industry. Research is often carried out in order to help improve company performance. For example, this may include consumer research so as to improve customer loyalty, competitor research to establish the potential threat of major rivals, or simply market research to establish if there is a market for a new product. In short, a practice-based researcher is unlikely to have the same flexibility when it comes to choosing a research topic as a student researcher. If you are studying on a general business and management course, most institutions simply specify that your topic must be business related. In principle, such a wide range of options sounds easy. In reality, it is usually anything but!

This chapter introduces you to arguably one of the most difficult stages of the research process – developing a research topic and a set of research questions. Or in other words, starting! By now, you should fully understand the nature of research, especially business research. The next step is to start thinking about a suitable topic. As most of you are studying on business-related programmes, naturally your topic must fall within the field of business and management. Unfortunately, a study on the breeding habits of the lesser-spotted eagle does not fall within the realms of

business! However, in many cases a topic can always be given a 'business spin'. For example, 'Marketing the importance of protecting the lesser-spotted eagle' is more likely to be acceptable.

This chapter begins by discussing the nature of your topic, especially what is meant by the word 'topic' in the context of your research project. This is then followed by a section that examines the best time to decide on your area of research, along with the characteristics that best illustrate a good research topic. You may simply decide to choose a topic that you have a passion for. However, in truth, simply choosing something that you enjoy may not necessarily be the right choice. This section will help you to determine whether or not your choice of topic is a viable one.

Next, idea generation is explored. Above all, sources of ideas that can help you to decide on a possible topic preference. Our attention then turns to research questions. We examine: developing research questions, their importance, how to formulate researchable research questions and, finally, limitations that may impact your choice of research questions. Following this, aims and objectives are fully addressed, along with the role of theory. This time the chapter concludes with an additional case study to illustrate how topic, objectives and research questions link together.

Nature of Your Topic

Prior to discussing the nature of your topic it is worth reviewing what is actually meant by the word 'topic'. The majority of research begins with a topic. In relation to business and management, a *topic* can be defined as 'a business-related idea or issue'. A topic can be broken down into '*broad topic*' and '*specific topic*'. These are largely self-explanatory. Nevertheless, every year I encounter projects that adopt the former. This is disappointing. Basing your research on a broad topic can lead to all sorts of problems when carrying out your research. For instance, it can make in-depth analysis later on in your study all the more difficult. An example of a broad topic might be: 'Marketing in the construction sector'. Refining this subject into a specific topic may read: 'Relationship marketing within the UK construction sector'. The importance of being specific when deciding on your topic is covered later in this chapter.

When do I have to decide on my topic?

Before looking at the criteria that you need to consider when choosing your topic, it is essential that you know at what stage during your studies you need to select your project topic. Naturally, this depends on your course. For most undergraduate students this tends to be sometime towards the end of their second or the beginning of their third year. For some students the prospect of selecting a topic is a daunting task, while others know exactly what it is they want to study. If you think that you are likely to fall into the former group, don't panic! The ability to generate ideas is

a key part to choosing your topic. You will find a useful guide on how to do this later in this chapter.

This next section is important as it sets out criteria that you need to consider when choosing your research topic. Although your area of research is business and management, the following criteria could almost apply to any academic discipline. In general, the characteristics of a good research topic include the following:

- your topic is achievable;
- your topic is specific;
- your topic is relevant;
- your topic satisfies project guidelines; and
- your topic is of interest to you.

Your topic is achievable

Previous modules studied during your course should provide some indication as to which topics you find easy and which ones are more difficult. Still, the extent to which your topic is *achievable* is not just dependent on your academic ability; other factors also impact your research. This includes access to data, the sensitivity of your chosen subject, the nature of your research questions and the achievability or, in other words, the level of *difficulty*, of your research. Devi Jankowicz (2005: 29) suggested that ‘difficulty’ can be broken down into the following six issues: (1) the level of qualification to which you are working; (2) the intrinsic complexity of the subject matter; (3) the availability of expertise on which you can draw; (4) the ease with which you can access data; (5) the financial costs involved; and (6) the time required to complete a project based on the topic in question.

- *The level of qualification to which you are working.* This relates to the type of degree that you’re studying. For most of you, this is an undergraduate degree. Therefore your chosen topic should lend itself to an undergraduate degree. You do not need to ‘make a contribution to knowledge’. This is something that tends to be a requirement for students undertaking a PhD. Nor do you need to reinvent the wheel! As a student researcher, it pays to be aware of your project requirements. Most readers are likely to be novice researchers. Therefore this will be reflected in the learning outcomes laid down by your academic institution.
- *The intrinsic complexity of the subject matter.* This concerns possible difficulties that you might face as a result of choosing a particularly complex topic. These may include: little published information in your university or college library; concepts and ideas that you may not have covered during your lectures; the contemporary nature of your topic may mean that the only information available is published in the commercial sector, thereby making it difficult to access.
- *The availability of expertise on which you can draw.* This concerns access to staff and resources. For example, if you intend studying entrepreneurship among UK small businesses, you will want access to a supervisor who specializes in this particular area. Similarly, you would also hope that your library computer resources hold relevant information on your area of research. Yet in some institutions it is not always easy to gain

access to a supervisor who is an expert in your chosen area. This is particularly the case in popular subjects such as Marketing.

- *The ease with which you can access data.* This depends on the nature of your topic. In some cases data may be too difficult to come by or simply too expensive, while in others it may take too long to acquire. The extent to which you are able to access data is an important consideration prior to going ahead with your research, as you do not want to encounter problems further down the line. Access to data is something that is clearly linked to ethical issues. For example, a director of a company may agree to provide you with invaluable information on condition that his or her identity is protected.
- *The financial costs involved.* While you may have ambitious ideas for a possible topic, they may not all be workable due to financial constraints. It is worth considering the financial cost and resources needed prior to commencing your research, as failure to do so might hinder your ability to address your objectives.
- *The time required to complete a project based on the topic in question.* Most students have a set timeframe for completing their research project. Typically, for undergraduate students this is the final year of their degree programme. Some students find the task of writing a project within this time period extremely challenging. The key to successfully completing any kind of project is planning. Having a set timetable to work to should ensure that you submit your project prior to your institution's deadline. However, remember that some aspects of your research, e.g. conducting interviews with company directors or travelling overseas to conduct interviews, may be susceptible to delays. Therefore, try to build a certain amount of flexibility into your planning.

Your topic is specific

Specific refers to the degree to which your research topic is focused and clear. The extent to which a research topic is specific depends on the clarity and number of words. Your topic is likely to start at a broad level. However, eventually you should end up with something that is specific enough for you to achieve within your research time period. As illustrated in Figure 2.1, 'Marketing' is a very broad topic that encompasses a number of different subdisciplines. These include consumer behaviour, market research and branding. Simply opting for marketing as your chosen topic would not allow you the necessary focus required to satisfactorily complete your project. On the other hand, the final box in Figure 2.1, 'Business marketing relationship between Cott Corporation and Tesco', provides the necessary focus required.

Your topic is relevant

Your college or university usually determines whether or not your topic is *relevant*. Obviously, for business students, it needs to be within the discipline of business and management. In general, this includes all functions of business. The main areas include marketing, finance, human resources and strategy. Those of you on courses based on specific areas of business, e.g. a BA (Hons) in Marketing, will undoubtedly select a topic that is relevant to marketing. This might include

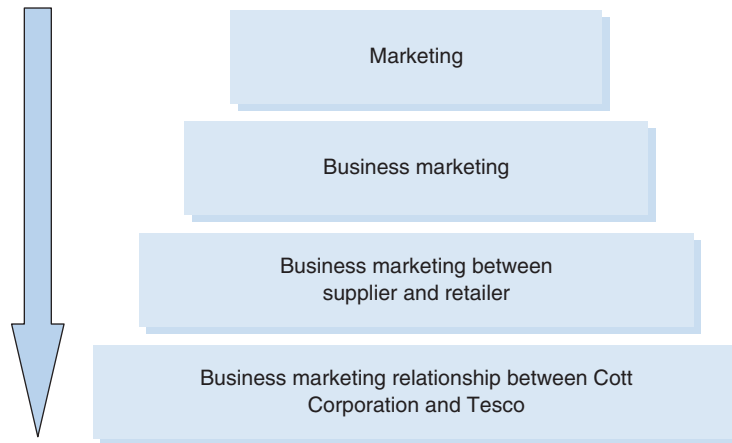


FIGURE 2.1 Narrowing down your research topic

business marketing, consumer behaviour, international marketing, marketing communications or marketing research. Those of you on general business study programmes, however, are likely to have greater flexibility.

I have supervised many research students over the years, yet the variety of topics never ceases to amaze me. Nevertheless, there are certain topics that I would call ‘hot topics’ among students. These tend to come up on a frequent basis because the large number of sources available, plus familiarity with the subject, make it a relatively easy option. Examples often include case studies such as Coca-Cola, Tesco, Ikea and Marks & Spencer. In recent years there has also been a significant increase in submissions focusing on China. This can probably be attributed to China’s rapid economic growth, accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 and Beijing’s hosting of the 2008 Olympic Games. In essence, there is nothing wrong with choosing a popular topic, although most supervisors would probably like to see something a little more imaginative!

Finally, when considering the relevance of your chosen topic, it is worth taking a long-term view. In other words, what are your plans after completing your study? Let’s say that you plan on working for one of the ‘Big Four’ accountancy firms. Then it makes sense to base your topic on something relevant to an area of accounting that fits with your career aspirations. For example, if you produce a project on auditing issues among UK SMEs, not only will this provide you with key transferable skills that can later be put to good use, but also the project itself may prove to be a useful ‘selling tool’ at interview.

Your topic satisfies project guidelines

Project guidelines are likely to be set out by your college or university. The flexibility governing your choice of topic typically varies between institutions; as a general

rule, though, the main requirement is that the topic chosen ‘fits’ within the course of study. For example, if undertaking a degree in Human Resource Management, a study based on reward systems among independent food retailers obviously fits within the overall study programme.

You may have a sponsor or employer who requires you to focus on a particular topic. In some cases, the findings of your project may be implemented by your sponsor or employer. Usually, this is of great personal satisfaction to the student, although trying to fulfil your own academic achievements, while at the same time producing a piece of work that meets your employer’s requirements, can be rather stressful to say the least!

Finally, your topic should satisfy ethical guidelines. Make sure that you understand your own institution’s rules and regulations governing ethics.

Your topic is of interest to you

The key word here is *motivation*. Obviously, if your passion is finance, then opting for a marketing-based subject may not satisfy your interest. Sometimes a student may select a topic because it is perceived as an easy or ‘soft’ option. Also, choice may be influenced by the reputation of a project supervisor. In reality, these are often poor reasons for selecting a particular topic. I regularly advise students that choosing a subject of interest is far more likely to lead to higher levels of motivation towards your research. Table 2.1 shows some sample topics by area, field and aspect.

It is worth noting that occasionally some students decide to change their topic at some point during their research. For example, if you decide that several months into your research you have ‘fallen out of love with finance’, one option is to consider changing your topic. But, understand that the later into your research you decide to change, the more difficult it will be to complete your project prior to your deadline. An added complication if you decide to change from one discipline to another, e.g. from Human Resources to Finance, is that you may also require a new supervisor. This could prove problematic, considering that most supervisors will already have been appointed. Therefore, if you wish to change your topic, my advice is to try to keep within the same subject discipline.

TABLE 2.1 Sample topics by area, field and aspect

| Area | Field | Aspect |
|-----------------|-------------------------|--|
| Marketing | International marketing | An analysis of market entry methods |
| Human Resources | Employee retention | An analysis of employee retention in relation to Hawkins plc |
| Finance | Management accounting | Development of a Word-based financial system for the Royal London Hospital Accounting Department |

What Makes a Good Research Topic?

While we have looked at the characteristics of a good research topic, what makes a good project in terms of ideas? First, you should now understand that you do not have to ‘reinvent the wheel’ to come up with a suitable idea. Your idea does not have to be original or unique, and may be similar to existing studies. Still, your final choice of topic is likely to come from your own idea or ideas, rather than someone else’s.

Generating ideas in relation to your topic usually begins at a broad level, and then a natural progression is to refine your ideas, thereby making them more specific. In reality, this is not always straightforward. Actually coming up with a workable idea is a common concern among students.

Generating research ideas

So far in this chapter you have learned the criteria to consider when choosing a research topic. Naturally, the next step is to start thinking about *generating research ideas*. Ideas for a research project can come from a variety of sources. These may include a discussion with your supervisor or employer, brainstorming (perhaps as part of a research skills class with other students), through reading existing literature, scanning previous research projects or drawing mind maps or relevance trees. If you do not have a topic, or are struggling to find one, don’t worry! Many students take time to select a suitable topic. In some cases, it may be because they have several ideas and find it difficult to select their preferred option, while others are perhaps hesitant to take that first step of the research process. Whatever the reasons, eventually a suitable topic is chosen. Deciding on a topic can often be made easier by using a variety of sources (see Figure 2.2). The following section explores some of these options in greater detail.

Discussion with your supervisor or employer

In all likelihood, your supervisor will be familiar with the broad topic area that you have chosen for your research, e.g. marketing, finance, human resources, strategy, etc. Typically, the role of the supervisor is not to tell a student what to study; however, they can certainly suggest possible topics. Also, they can perhaps recommend relevant books and/or articles that can help to stimulate ideas.

Consider, too, talking to other tutors within your college or university. While not directly involved in your research project, tapping into their experience and knowledge is also likely to stimulate ideas. However, be wary of the fact that tutors are often likely to recommend a topic closely linked to their own preference and area of research. As a result, their expectations of your work may be higher.

Topics such as human resources and marketing are particularly popular with students. This is especially true of the latter. Therefore, if you opt for a marketing-based topic, you may find yourself competing with a large number of students for a small number of potential supervisors. If this means the appointment

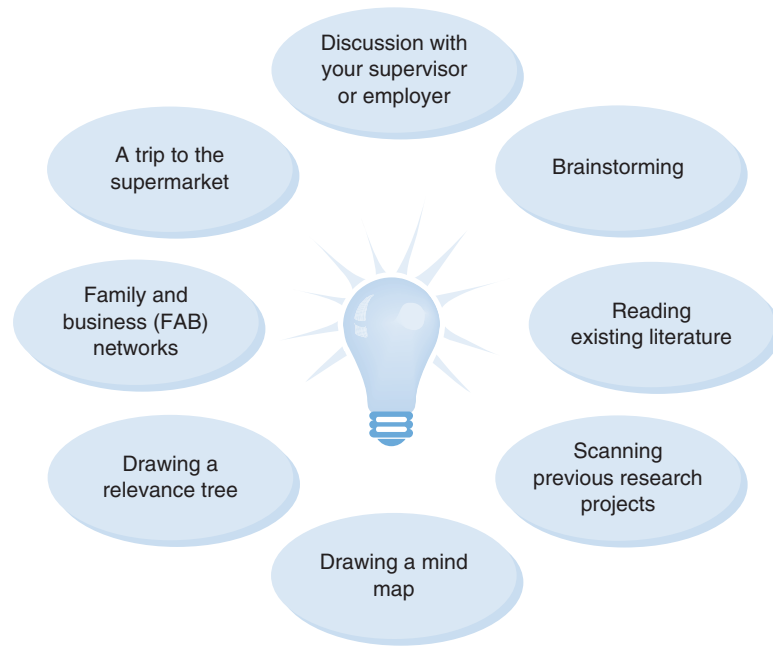


FIGURE 2.2 Sources of ideas

of a supervisor who does not teach your chosen topic, this is not a major concern. A key part to any project is structure. The main chapters, such as introduction, literature review, methodology and results will be familiar to your supervisor, irrespective of their specialism.

Many institutions also frequently hold research seminars and guest lectures. These can provide an insight into a diverse range of topics. In some cases guest lecturers working for local companies are usually happy to take questions during and after presentations. This may provide an interesting source of developing your ideas.

Part-time students may be in a fortunate position to discuss their research with their employer. In some cases employers see this as an opportunity to support the student in return for having access to their findings. I recall one particular student who worked part-time for an established independent hotel. Her employer was fully supportive and took a vested interest in her research. The student was able to carry out research into the hotel's operational procedures and had full access to staff, guests and hotel records. Upon completion of her study, management implemented a number of her recommendations. At the same time, the student found the whole experience extremely rewarding. This was reflected in her achieving an excellent mark for her efforts.

Not all students, of course, are fortunate enough to have the support of an employer. Still, it is worth considering discussing ideas with local firms. Often small companies in particular can be very supportive towards students.

Brainstorming

Students undertaking a research skills module are likely to participate in a *brainstorming* session as part of their module. Developed by a US advertising executive in the 1950s, brainstorming is a problem-solving technique conducted in a group environment. Adrian Furnham (2000: 22) suggested that a number of rules have been developed to ensure that a brainstorming session is properly conducted:

- *Group size should be about five to seven people.* If there are too few people, not enough suggestions are generated. If too many people participate, the session becomes uncontrolled and uncontrollable.
- *No criticism is allowed.* All suggestions should be welcome.
- *Freewheeling is encouraged.* The more outlandish the idea the better.
- *Quantity and variety are very important.* The more ideas put forth, the more likely is a breakthrough idea. The aim is to generate a long list of ideas.
- *Combinations and improvements are encouraged.* Building on the ideas of others, including combining them, is very productive.
- *Notes must be taken during the sessions.* Either manually or with an electronic recording device. The alternatives generated during the first part of the session should later be edited for duplication and categorizations.

The session should not be overstructured by following any of these rules too rigidly. Brainstorming is a spontaneous small-group process and is meant to be fun.

Students often much prefer to be able to talk to their peers about their topic, rather than just their supervisor. While brainstorming can be fun, it can also be highly productive by raising both positive and negative aspects associated with your research.

Reading existing literature

Among sources of ideas for a research project, perhaps the most important are textbooks and academic journals. These can be an excellent source of inspiration. As a student, you should already be reading these on a regular basis. Reading through academic or peer-reviewed journals will also give you some idea of the amount of available literature on a possible topic. Be careful here. Although a large amount of literature may prove very useful, it may also mean that a particular topic has been exhausted. In other words, it is already a well-trodden path. Similarly, a dearth of literature on a possible topic may make it difficult when writing your literature review.

Unfortunately, students often ignore the significance of academic journals. Not only can these be an excellent source of ideas, but they also contain many of the features associated with a research project, namely an introduction, literature review, methodology, data analysis, conclusion and referencing. It is worth familiarizing yourself with these features at an early stage as it can only help to better prepare you for your own research.

Scanning previous research projects

Scanning past projects within your university or college can be a useful way of generating ideas. In addition to differences in subject, previous research projects also differ in terms of approach. This can help you to start thinking about your own methodology as well as research topic. As a general rule, universities and colleges do not reveal marks of past projects. Therefore, in some cases it may prove difficult to determine the quality of work. Riley et al. (2000: 32) highlighted the advantages and disadvantages of referring to previous projects:

- *Advantages.* The possibility of advancing and/or developing a previous piece of research; and locating a piece of research where external contacts and respondents who participated in the research may be willing to help again.
- *Disadvantages.* A risk of relying too heavily on previous research and doing little original research to advance it; and settling on a dissertation or report that was originally weak in terms of topic choice, execution or some other criterion (to assist with this aspect, it may be possible to find out how 'good' such pieces of work were by talking to tutors).

Drawing a mind map

A *mind map* involves writing the name of a phrase or theme of your proposed research in the centre of the page. You then branch out with each sub-theme, further sub-themes, and so on (see Figure 2.3). The advantage of a mind map is that it can help you to develop links between ideas, it can stimulate further ideas, and it

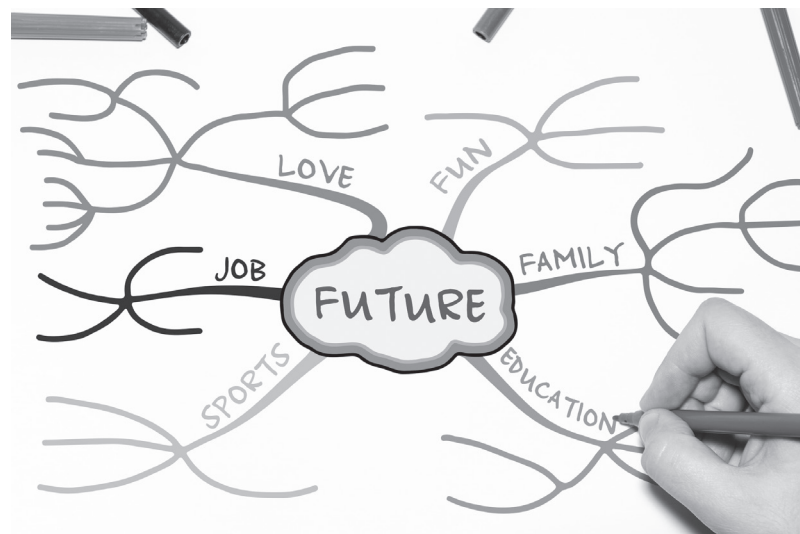


FIGURE 2.3 An example of a mind map

Mind map of a successful future hand drawn on paper using felt pen.
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can help you to set boundaries when conducting your research. Producing a mind map involves a series of simple stages:

1. Arm yourself with a blank sheet of A3 or A4 paper and lots of coloured felt tip pens.
2. Relax, think 'creative'; you do not have to be an expert artist!
3. Select your key word or image, for example 'Business research', and write or mark it in the centre of the page.
4. Branch off any ideas related to this central theme, such as 'methodology', 'literature review' and 'research questions'. Include thoughts which may seem irrational or obscure – they will give you a fresh perspective on your subject.
5. Use one colour for each branch, with sub-branches flowing off from the centre continuing until you have exhausted all possible links.
6. Restrict your thoughts to one word per line, so you are free to make a greater number of connections.
7. Use images instead of words whenever possible, and draw boxes around, or otherwise highlight, important information. The more colourful your mind map the easier it will be to remember things.
8. When you think you have finished, edit and regroup your notes on a fresh sheet in order to produce your final mind map.

(Adapted from 'Mind Maps chart the way to business efficiency', 1998)

Drawing a relevance tree

A *relevance tree* is an alternative form of mind map, but it tends to be more ordered. Relevance trees provide structure to your literature search as well as generating boundaries. The headings and subheadings are often key words that can later be used electronically to aid your literature search. Relevance trees are often a logical next step following a brainstorming session.

To set out a relevance tree, you should:

- begin with your research question or objective at the top of the page;
- identify the key subject areas that you think are important;
- further subdivide each major subject area into sub-areas which you think are of relevance;
- further divide the sub-areas into more precise sub-areas that you think are of relevance;
- identify those areas on which you need to focus (your project will be of particular help here); and
- as your reading and reviewing progress, add new areas to your relevance tree.

Family and business networks

Family and business (FAB) networks relates to your own personal web of contacts. In general, the latter is probably less likely to apply to full-time students who have yet to gain employment. Mature and part-time students, however, may have built up a comprehensive network of business contacts. These contacts may be in a position to offer more than a range of ideas, such as sponsorship of your research.

As well as providing moral support and encouragement during your study, family may also be in a position to help with your research. And I don't mean writing

it! I mean helping in other ways, such as older siblings who have gone through the research process and are able to provide their own first-hand views of what you can expect, family contacts who may make suitable interviewees as part of a sample; or you may even be in a position where a member of your family runs a business and is looking for your project to form the basis of their next strategic direction! No matter what the extent of your family's input, it is a potential source of ideas that should not be ignored.

A trip to the supermarket

No, I haven't gone mad! Think about it for a moment. For business and management students one potential source of stimulus is to look at what's going on in your local supermarket. Possible topics include product development, branding, consumer behaviour, pricing, customer service, sales promotion, corporate strategy – the list is almost endless. Because the likes of Tesco and Asda have diversified into other products and services, increased their number of stores and penetrated international markets, the scope for topics on which to write is huge.

Finally, the above sources of ideas are by no means exhaustive. Essentially, they give you an overview of how to generate and develop your ideas prior to beginning the next step: establishing a research problem.

Research problem

A research topic is not the same as a *research problem*. A research problem tends to be more specific. For example, a research topic may be concerned with the internationalization of German engineering companies, whereas a research problem leads to a more specific question, such as: 'What motivates German engineering companies to internationalize?' Basically, when you start to move from a general topic to a research problem, you are beginning to make progress in refining your research. Research questions are the tools that help you to answer your research problem. Yet, just how do you develop these research questions? And why are research questions so important? The answers to these questions are addressed in the following sections.

How to Develop Research Questions

Although some of you may have a pretty good idea of your chosen topic, at some point this needs to be broken down into *research questions*. If you already have a clear idea of your chosen topic, then you should find the next subsection beneficial as it deals with the important task of developing research questions.

The importance of developing a clear and focused set of research questions has already been stressed in Chapter 1, though at some point your research idea needs refining in order to develop research questions. A research question usually follows

a *general research idea*. The majority of business and management students are expected to generate their own ideas and subsequent research questions. In this respect, it is probably the first time you have not been given a pre-set range of questions. A useful exercise is to ask yourself certain questions to help you clarify the nature of your research:

- What do you want to find out?
- Why do you want to research this topic?
- Why does this research need to be carried out? (Is there a gap in the literature, or does it contribute to existing theory and/or management practice?)
- What data/information already exists in other similar studies?

(Adapted from Wilkinson, 2000: 16)

First, try to define in no more than 12 words exactly what it is you wish to find out. In other words, sum up the nature of your research in no more than one sentence. This is a useful exercise as it helps you to clarify in your own mind what you intend to achieve from your research.

Second, try to provide reasons for choosing your particular topic. As mentioned earlier, for many students these include a topic that is of personal interest and related to your future career aspirations. In general, being able to explain why you wish to research your chosen topic area helps to justify your research, while at the same time should also help motivate you to undertake and finally complete your research.

A third key issue is to establish why it is important for your chosen research topic to be carried out. From your background reading you may have identified a gap that exists in the current literature on the subject area that requires further investigation. Whatever the reason, it is important that you understand the significance underlying your research.

With respect to what information currently exists elsewhere, students are often faced with either a wealth or dearth of information. A wealth of information is in some respects more difficult for a student. This is for two reasons: the literature review can be more time-consuming, and it can be challenging when it comes to identifying the most relevant literature. Sometimes, if a student is faced with a huge amount of literature to review, this can eat into valuable time required to carry out other stages of the research. Identifying the most relevant literature can be made easier by counting the number of citations: the more frequently a particular author is referred to by others often indicates the level of importance of that particular author's work.

A dearth of information can also be time-consuming, as some sources may prove difficult to access. For example, your university or college may not have access to some American journal articles essential to your study. These may need to be ordered, which obviously takes time.

In summary, the key questions highlighted above are a constructive exercise in helping to clarify your research. It provides a useful platform to help develop your research questions.

Why are research questions important?

Similar to your chosen topic, generally, your research question(s) should satisfy the following requirements: they must be achievable, specific, relevant, satisfy your institutions guidelines and, finally, perhaps above all, be of interest to you!

Arguably, research questions are the most important aspect to a project for the following reasons:

1. They help to set boundaries when conducting your literature review and help to identify the key literature.
2. They help propose a suitable methodology.
3. They help produce a refined set of results.
4. They allow easier analysis.
5. They help to draw together a reasonable set of conclusions and make reference to previous research.

Just as your topic needs to be specific, so do your research questions. In short, your research questions are the tools that help you to identify and narrow your literature to something that is manageable, and can be reviewed within your time constraints. However, to be able to do this, it is vital that you formulate a researchable set of research questions. The next section looks at how this can be achieved.

How to formulate a researchable research question

When formulating a research question it is perhaps worth considering the possible weaknesses. A number of weaknesses can be identified in relation to research questions. Common weaknesses that I tend to come across include: being too sensitive, not specific enough, being more appropriate to a longitudinal study, and simply not being measurable. Let us examine these points more closely.

First, certain subjects are taboo and others are sensitive. If your research includes questions on sensitive or embarrassing topics, there is every possibility that this will seriously impact your response rate. For example, questions concerning politics, demographics and education should be formulated with caution. In addition, if your research involves cross-cultural research, there is a greater likelihood that you will encounter problems over the formulation of questions. From my own experience of conducting cross-cultural research involving Western and Chinese participants, the best thing to do in an attempt to avoid such difficulties is to conduct joint research. In other words, researchers from different cultural backgrounds work together on a project, such as a US and a Chinese researcher working on a comparative study of brand loyalty in the US and Chinese automobile markets. Then again, as a student researcher, having a fellow researcher is not something that you are privileged to. For that reason, if the nature of your research is cross-cultural issues, the best way to proceed is to consult your supervisor, friends and family, and relevant literature on culture in order to avoid potential pitfalls when compiling your questions.

Second, the specific nature of research questions has already been addressed. Third, a *longitudinal study* is a piece of research conducted over an extended period of time. In some cases, your research questions may be better suited to this type of research. An example might be a study of the changes in consumer behaviour in the UK automobile market. Unlike the technology sector, major changes in the automobile market tend to occur over a reasonable period of time. Hence the need for a longitudinal study that identifies and measures the changes over time.

Lastly, you may have difficulty measuring your findings if your research question does not allow for access to information, or is too ambitious or poorly worded. Ideally, when formulating your research questions, the following issues need to be considered:

- your questions must not be too easy;
- they should allow for suitable analysis;
- they should provide a future perspective;
- they should allow the generation of new insights; and
- they should avoid common areas of research.

Of these, 'provide for a future perspective' is an area that is often overlooked by students. For example: 'What impact is the introduction of a minimum wage likely to have on the employment market over the short to medium term?' Notice that 'short to medium term' provides the future perspective. Incorporating a question of this nature allows for detailed analysis.

Recognizing limitations of a particular research question

It is important to recognize certain limitations when formulating your research questions. Most institutions require students to work to a strict timetable in terms of project submission. Obviously, this then rules out research questions centred on a longitudinal study. Common limitations linked to research questions include: a lack of focus, being too lengthy, being too optimistic and not being relevant.

One approach to formulating your research questions is to consider what I refer to as the 'broken vase' method. When attempting to put the pieces of a broken vase back together, you will find that some pieces are too big, too small, too fragmented, too sharp; too many pieces look alike; and finally there are the pieces that fit just right. Table 2.2 shows how this analogy can be applied to research questions.

Table 2.2 shows the last question to be the most suitable. By now, you should be in a position to understand why this question is suitable, as opposed to the other examples in the table. In general, Table 2.2 provides a useful guide when you come to develop your own research questions. However, research questions are only one aspect when it comes to explaining the direction of your research. Having a clear set of aims and objectives is just as important as your research questions.

How do I know if my research questions are just right and what are the criteria of judgement? On the first point, hopefully Table 2.2 is a helpful reference; you can

TABLE 2.2 Research questions and their relationship to the ‘broken vase’ method

| Research question | Broken vase method |
|--|---|
| How does the introduction of a supermarket loyalty card generate loyalty and customer satisfaction among UK shoppers? | <i>Too big:</i> This question consists of too many words and would be difficult to achieve. |
| What is sustainable management? | <i>Too small:</i> Also having a single ‘What’ question is likely to produce an excessively descriptive piece of work. |
| What marketing communication tools do companies employ in the business-to-business sector, how effective are these, why are they employed? | Although you can argue that this is essentially too big, the main problem is that it is <i>too fragmented</i> . It actually comprises three research questions. |
| What are the levels of bribery and corruption within central government? | <i>Too sharp or sensitive.</i> |
| How do Chinese cultural values impact on management and leadership style? | <i>Look alike, too similar.</i> |
| How do cultural values influence Chinese management? | |
| How successful is Brampton plc in the Indonesian market? | <i>Just right.</i> |

also consult your project supervisor for his or her views. In terms of criteria of judgement, to a certain extent deciding whether a research question is just right is a subjective one. Using other researchers’ questions as a benchmark is a good starting point. One way to establish if their research questions are suitable is to read later stages of their research, such as the literature review and methodology. If their research questions are too big, then this will be reflected in the literature review. Quite simply, they will not have been able to cover all of the key literature, as their research questions lack focus.

Also, it is important to stress that your research questions are likely to result from reviewing the literature. The reasons for this are twofold. First, reading the research questions of experienced scholars provides a useful insight when it comes to developing your own set of research questions. Second, you will be able to identify the contribution that your study can make to the literature, thus your research questions will reflect this. Do not be too concerned with literature review at this stage, as I cover it at great length in Chapter 3.

How to Develop Aims and Objectives

Sometimes the words ‘aims’ and ‘objectives’ are used interchangeably. Yet there is a distinct difference. An *aim* can be described as a general statement of what the research sets out to achieve, while an *objective* is a more specific statement relating to the defined aim of your research. Quite simply, the aim is what you want to achieve, and the objective describes how you are going to achieve that aim. Both aims and objectives are equally important. Looking ahead to the conclusion

of your project, you will need to assess to what extent you have achieved your set aims and objectives.

Although aims tend to be more general than objectives, the two should be very much interrelated. An objective is derived from an aim, has the same intention as an aim, but is more specific. Your number of research objectives should be limited to a convenient quantity. The more objectives you have, the less likely you will be able to achieve each one fully.

Consider the following examples, showing the 'link' between research questions and objectives. Examples of research questions:

1. How important are the various factors for evaluating staff performance?
2. How have sports celebrities contributed to the Gillette brand?
3. What attitudes do consumers have towards fair trade products?

Examples of research objectives:

1. Identify the reasons behind the company's expansion into the Dutch market.
2. To determine the best way our company can increase staff retention over the next financial year.
3. To establish the best way of introducing a sales training scheme.

In essence, an objective is a statement that sets out to define a particular problem, while a research question tends to be more specific about what it is you are trying to achieve. Finally, research questions also sometimes include a clear, well-written set of hypotheses. 'A *hypothesis* is an unproven proposition or possible solution to a problem. Hypothetical statements assert probable answers to research questions. A hypothesis is also a statement about the nature of the world, and in its simplest form it is a guess' (Zikmund, 2003: 99). For example, a marketing manager may hypothesize that an increase in advertising spend will lead to an increase in sales.

Basically, a hypothesis is concerned with the relationship between two variables. The hypothesis will predict the relationship between variables, and, through testing, may or may not support the theory. There are two types of variables associated with hypotheses – independent and dependent variables. *Independent variables* are those seen as a 'cause', while a *dependent variable* is seen as the 'effect' (outcome). This is often referred to as a cause-and-effect relationship. Using the example 'In Sino-UK joint ventures what is the effect of trust and commitment on joint venture performance?', the independent variable would be 'trust and commitment', and the dependent variable (or outcome) would be joint venture performance.

A hypothesis can also be stated as a null hypothesis. This states that there is no relationship between the independent and dependent variables, and is mainly used in research involving statistical analysis (see Chapter 9).

Why are objectives important?

We have established that objectives set out how you are going to achieve your aims. The important point, however, is that objectives allow you to set 'boundaries' prior to conducting your research. Similar to research questions, objectives provide a focus for your research. As mentioned, unlike research questions, objectives tend to be statements; they do not ask an outright question. The main thing that research questions and objectives have in common is that both seek to generate answers. Because of this, sometimes these words are used interchangeably to mean one and the same.

How to formulate researchable objectives

An easy way to formulate research objectives is to consider applying the widely used acronym 'SMART'. It stands for 'Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timed'.

- *Specific.* Are the objectives stated clearly? Are they focused and indicate what is to be achieved?
- *Measurable.* Can the stated objectives measure what is claimed?
- *Achievable.* Are your objectives achievable and attainable?
- *Relevant.* Objectives should also add value to your chosen topic and, above all, be applicable to your subject.
- *Timed.* Is there a time period within which the objectives will be accomplished?

Although SMART is a good starting point when formulating your objectives, it is also worth taking into account the factors that may contribute to a poor set of objectives. First, make sure that you do not fall into the trap of just repeating the same objectives, but in slightly different terms. In essence, there should be a clear distinction between each objective. Second, make sure that your objectives are structured in the correct way. Ideally this should be in bullet-point format, rather than as a list of 'issues' related to your chosen topic. Third, remember that your objectives need to be more specific than your aims. Therefore, spend time making sure that they are not too vague, overly ambitious or lack focus. Fourth, ensure that the objectives 'fit' within your chosen topic area and do not fall within another discipline. And finally, do not contradict yourself within your objectives, e.g. say that you intend doing one thing, while in another objective state the complete opposite.

In summary, we have now looked at four areas of research that are clearly inter-linked – problem, aims, objectives and research questions. By now, you should have an understanding of what is meant by each term, along with how, collectively, they form an important part of your research project. However, to make things clearer, Figure 2.4 shows each of these areas and the relationship between each one.

The example in Figure 2.4 is clearly linked to a business scenario. But, as a student researcher, you also need to be aware of how to arrive at a set of research questions that form the basis of your research project. Failure to do so is likely to lead to problems already cited in this chapter.

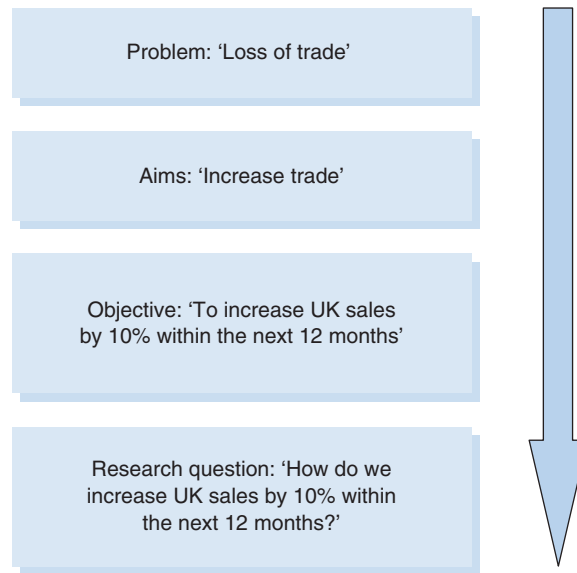


FIGURE 2.4 Relationship between problem, aims, objectives and questions

Theory, Research Questions and Objectives

It is important to understand theory when formulating your research questions and objectives. *Theory* is a word that many people recognize as having several meanings. As a student, I'm sure that you have come across the word on many occasions. For example, your lecturer may make reference to a 'lack of theoretical application' in one of your assignments. Fred N. Kerlinger (1986: 9) defined theory as 'a set of interrelated constructs (concepts), definitions, and propositions that present a systematic view of phenomena specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting the phenomena'.

In short, theory is a set of principles devised to explain phenomena. In order to be able to explain phenomena, a theory needs to be applied (application); once applied, this will produce an outcome (result). For example, many business students are familiar with Michael Porter's Five Forces theory. In essence, the theory proposes that industries are influenced by five forces. The outcome of applying Porter's theory is dependent on a number of factors, e.g. time, industry and setting (national, international, global).

When formulating your research questions and objectives you need to consider how theory will feature in your research. For example, if you opt for a deductive approach, normally you would conduct a literature review in order to identify an appropriate theory and construct a hypothesis. On the other hand, if you decide on the inductive approach, your principles are likely to be based on the development of theory following your data collection.

CASE STUDY

Given the importance of choosing your topic, developing objectives and formulating research questions, the next section includes a student case that brings together much of what I have covered in this chapter. Remember that it is not so much the topic that is important, but the formulation of the objectives and research questions.

Alexander, a BA (Hons) Business Management student, decided to focus his research project on the 'Internationalization of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) based in the West of England'. The main objective of his proposed research was:

to better understand the internationalization process and market entry methods of SMEs based in the West of England. The aim is not only to evaluate internationalization process and market entry methods, but also to analyze what types of strategy SMEs need to take in order to compete successfully in emerging international markets.

The objectives of his study were as follows:

- To understand what motivates SMEs to internationalize.
- To examine the internationalization strategies adopted by SMEs.
- To determine the market entry methods chosen by SMEs.
- To examine the strategies SMEs need to adopt in order to successfully compete in emerging international markets.

The main research questions to be addressed were:

- Why do SMEs decide to internationalize?
- What internationalization strategies do SMEs adopt?
- How do SMEs enter emerging international markets?
- What strategies do SMEs need to adopt in order to successfully compete in emerging international markets?

The rationale of undertaking his research was as follows:

Although the internationalization of firms has been well documented, there is a lack of research into the internationalization process of SMEs, particularly those based in the West of England. The leading emerging markets of India and China have also received limited attention. In short, this is an area of research that remains under-explored. The majority of the literature has tended to focus on the internationalization of large multinational companies and market entry into developed markets such as the US and Europe. UK government initiatives to encourage UK SMEs to internationalize, especially in emerging markets such as India and China, mean that research in this area is both important and timely.

Notice how the objectives and research questions are very much related to one another. Also, the title is short and to the point. Finally, through reading the key literature on the subject, Alexander was able to identify a clear rationale for his study.

RESEARCH IN ACTION

Are you happy?

At a cost of £2 million, the government's 'happiness survey' will be sent to 200,000 households per year until 2015. David Cameron, the British Prime Minister, chose to introduce a new 'happiness index' as a way of measuring well-being by means other than wealth and spending. The first results, published in July 2012, show that the average adult was rated 7.4 out of 10 for life satisfaction.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, results also show that those who have more money are a lot happier with their lives. It found that the poorest are the least happy, while those in the higher tax bracket are the most satisfied. Although most people are happy, traditional married families are happiest of all.

The 'happiness index' has its critics. Len McCluskey, the newly elected general secretary of the giant Unite union, said it was an attempt by the Coalition to 'pull the wool over people's eyes' and disguise the impact of spending cuts. While an article in *The Independent* newspaper (2011) suggested that we could all become happier, and that 'One way to achieve that, for most of us, would be by persuading the Government to stop wasting our ever-onerous taxes on entirely pointless surveys.' Some of the criticism centred on the research questions. For example, one question asked whether 'the things you do in your life are worthwhile'. However, for all its critics, the happiness survey is with us until 2015. The big question is: Will people be happier next year?

Although the above example cannot be described as 'business research', the reasons I have chosen the UK government's happiness survey are threefold. First, it illustrates the difficulty in measuring a broad, multifaceted topic like well-being. Second, it shows that formulating research questions to measure something as subjective as happiness is no easy task. Third, this case also demonstrates the importance of defining any terms used in research. The same applies to your own study. For example, let's say that you have the following research question: 'How successful are UK companies in the luxury brands market?' One of the key terms in this question is 'successful'. Success can be defined and measured in many different ways. Examples include profit, turnover, customer satisfaction and market share, to name but a few. It is important to make it clear which definition you will be using in your study. This is often explained in the literature review and may also be explained to respondents when collecting primary data (see Chapters 3 and 6 respectively). In a positivist study, it is essential to define key terms, as this will promote greater consistency and validity in your research. If you are undertaking an interpretivist study, then you are likely to be engaging in research of an exploratory nature. Thus, defining key terms might be more difficult as they are likely to be an outcome of the research.

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has been about developing a suitable research topic, objectives and research questions. In it, we have looked at the characteristics of a good research topic, and how to formulate objectives and research questions. Here are the key points from this chapter:

- A topic can be broken down into ‘broad topic’ and ‘specific topic’.
- The characteristics of a good research topic are that it must be achievable, specific, relevant, satisfy project guidelines and be of interest to you.
- Topic ideas can come from a number of sources, including brainstorming sessions, discussion with your supervisor, reading existing literature and family and business networks.
- Ask yourself certain issues that help to clarify the nature of your research, e.g. define what you want to find out.
- Research questions are important because they help to set boundaries when conducting your literature review.
- When formulating your research questions, they must not be too easy.
- An aim can be described as a general statement of what the research sets out to achieve, whereas an objective is a more specific statement relating to the defined aim of your research.
- A hypothesis is an unproven proposition or possible solution to a problem. Hypothetical statements assert probable answers to research questions.
- Theory is a set of principles devised to explain phenomena. In order to be able to explain phenomena, a theory needs to be applied (application); once applied, this will produce an outcome (result).

CASE STUDY

Turning a Research Topic into Aims, Objectives and Research Questions

Sandra was thrilled to have been chosen as a volunteer for the 2012 London Olympic Games. She was very much looking forward to the experience and considered it to be a strong ‘selling point’ when applying for graduate jobs. Due to commence the final year of a BA (Hons) Business Management degree in September 2012, Sandra also deemed the London Olympics as a possible topic for her undergraduate research project. She had already done some background reading on the London Olympics and had found a large amount of published material on all aspects of the games. This included research studies published in academic journals on everything from the tourism implications of the games to corporate sponsorship. In terms of the latter, Sandra was particularly interested in how the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) protected their sponsors’ interests. More specifically, she wanted to know the preventative measures the committee took against the marketing strategy of associating a brand with the Olympics, when a brand has not paid for the right to be an official sponsor – otherwise known as ‘ambush marketing’.

Sandra was pleased with her chosen area of research, but was unsure how to narrow down her selected topic into a set of aims, research objectives and research questions.

Case study question

- Can you help Sandra by suggesting a possible set of aims, objectives and research questions?

YOU'RE THE SUPERVISOR

You have received a number of research proposals from final-year Business Management students. Each proposal should set out the nature of the research topic, research aims, objectives and research questions. In addition, there should be a brief overview of the key literature, methodology and research timetable. One would expect to see a proposal contain a reasonably focused research topic. The nature of the topic should be specific, relevant and achievable. Four

of the proposals you have received have raised concerns over the choice of research topic. Discuss the problems associated with each research topic.

Research topics

1. Promoting equal opportunities in the workplace.
2. Sources of finance for small businesses.
3. Measuring the future success of luxury brands.
4. Making sense of UK crime statistics.

COMMON QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. At what point should I choose my research topic?

Answer: Your institution is likely to have a deadline at which point you should have chosen your research topic. Typically, the choice of research topic is submitted as part of a research proposal usually up to 12 months before the project deadline. However, this does not mean that you should wait until you are required to produce a research proposal before thinking about possible areas of research. From my own experience of supervising countless research projects, I tend to find that those students who decide on a topic before their final year are less likely to have difficulty in starting their research. If you do not give your choice of topic much thought early on, then you may find you ‘panic’ into choosing something. Ostensibly, this will lead to a greater likelihood that you will change your mind. This is primarily because you have not devoted sufficient time to thinking about the implications of choosing a particular research topic.

2. What factors should I consider when choosing my research topic?

Answer: As noted earlier in the chapter, you should choose a topic that is specific, relevant, satisfies project guidelines and is of interest to you. Furthermore, consider how your choice of topic might be of benefit in relation to your chosen career.

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