

# **Research Methods**

## **Module Introduction and Overview**

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## 1 Introduction to the Module

Research plays an essential role in business and in public policy and management. Increasingly, organisations undertake small-scale research projects, to find out about matters relating to the concerns of their organisation or to critically evaluate existing policies. Both commercial firms and government institutions rely upon research to inform their decisions, to test the effectiveness of existing policies, to predict the effects of intended future policies, to understand management processes and decisions and to gain insights into public preferences and opinions about public services.

Whether you are studying this module in order to carry out research in your professional role, to commission and project-manage research conducted by others or to complete a dissertation for your MSc qualification, your ability to appropriately and rigorously design, execute, report and evaluate research is essential.

The range of research issues and research methods available for researchers to use is vast – too vast to be covered in one introductory module. Therefore, this module concentrates on helping you to develop a rigorous understanding of the key principles and practice of research necessary to get a research project up and running.

With this as our main concern, the aims of this introductory module are three-fold:

- First, the module is designed to help you develop a thorough understanding of the fundamental theoretical ideas and logic of research. These fundamental ideas underpin our approach to research, the vast range of research methods available and the researcher's choice of methods.
- Secondly, the module aims to help you develop a thorough understanding of the issues involved in planning, designing, executing, evaluating and reporting research.
- Finally, the module aims to introduce you to many of the technical aspects of how to do empirical research using some of the main data collection and analysis techniques used by researchers.

The overarching aim, though, is to enable you to carry out your own research, confidently using techniques appropriate to your research question and reaching relevant and confirmable conclusions.

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## 2 The Module Authors

**Damian Tobin** is Lecturer in Chinese Business and Management at the Centre for Finance and Management Studies, SOAS University of London and is academic director of the International Business Administration distance learning programme. He has published on topics related to China's enterprise reform, corporate governance and public finance. His articles

have appeared in several academic journals. He has significant experience in providing economic policy briefings for international corporations, governments, think tanks and advisory firms.

**Norman Flynn** was Academic Director of the Public Policy and Management programmes at CeFiMS. He has over twenty years' experience of research and evaluation. His research experience has included extensive interviews in Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and China for his book *Miracle to Meltdown in Asia*, statistical analysis of student performance and characteristics in secondary schools in Hong Kong, street surveys for the evaluation of inner city policy in London and analysis of secondary data for commentaries on public spending and social policies in Europe.

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### 3 Study Resources

Your study materials for this module are this study guide, the core texts, the module readings, and a selection of research papers demonstrating different research approaches.

#### Key texts

Martyn Denscombe (2017) *The Good Research Guide: For Small-scale Research Projects*. 6th Edition. London, Open University Press.

Kathleen McMillan and Jonathan Weyers (2011) *How to Write Dissertations and Project Reports*. 2nd Edition. Harlow UK, Pearson Education Ltd.

Whether you are conducting research in the public or private sector and whether you are undertaking research as a practitioner, as a professional or for academic purposes, there are many methods of enquiry that you can use. These titles cover the main research methods used, particularly for small-scale, applied research work.

#### Module readings

The module readings consist of a collection of journal articles and book extracts that are of particular relevance and interest to the topics covered in the module. The unit text provides guidance on how to use the module readings.

#### Research papers

You are also provided with access to a selection of research papers, as examples of the various research techniques taught in the module, and you will be directed to look at them when relevant in the unit text.

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### 4 Module Overview

Business and public policy and management rely heavily on research – to test whether current business strategies or public policies are effective, to evaluate management processes and outcomes, and to understand public

opinion and preferences about public services. This module is designed to provide a good grounding in research methods to enable you to design, conduct and evaluate research, whether in your professional capacity or to submit an academic dissertation.

The module divides into a qualitative and a quantitative option at Units 5 and 6. If you are using this module as preparation for a dissertation on your MSc degree, you should, by Unit 5, decide whether your approach is to be quantitative or qualitative and choose whether to follow 5A and 6A or 5B and 6B. The module comes together in a single strand for Unit 7, on validity, and Unit 8 on writing up research. The module units cover the following topics.

### **Unit 1 The Nature of Research**

- 1.1 What is Research – Pure and Practical?
- 1.2 The Relationship between Theory, Research and Data
- 1.3 Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methods in Social Research
- 1.4 Objectivity and Reflexivity

### **Unit 2 Planning and Designing Research**

- 2.1 Planning and Managing Time and Resources
- 2.2 Formulating and Focusing the Research Topic
- 2.3 Choosing a Research Strategy and Design
- 2.4 Ethical Considerations and Issues of Access

### **Unit 3 Reviewing the Literature and Making Methodological Choices**

- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 The Purpose of Searching and Reviewing Literature
- 3.3 Planning Your Search of the Literature
- 3.4 Recording the Literature
- 3.5 Writing a Critical Review
- 3.6 Some Common Faults in Literature Reviews

### **Unit 4 Data**

- 4.1 What is Measurement?
- 4.2 Measurement Issues
- 4.3 Data Classification and Why it Matters
- 4.4 Describing Data
- 4.5 Variance and Standard Deviation
- 4.6 Sampling and Selection

### **Unit 5A Interviews, Focus Groups and Surveys**

- 5A.1 Introduction to the Interview
- 5A.2 Types of Research Interviews
- 5A.3 Administration of Interviews
- 5A.4 When to Use Interviews
- 5A.5 Designing Research Interviews
- 5A.6 Conducting Interviews
- 5A.7 Recording and Transcribing Interviews
- 5A.8 How Do We Know the Informant is Telling the Truth?

- 5A.9 Analysing Interview Data
- 5A.10 What is a Questionnaire?
- 5A.11 Types and Administration of Questionnaires
- 5A.12 Constructing Questionnaires
- 5A.13 Coding Questions
- 5A.14 Pilot-Testing Questionnaires
- 5A.15 Ethics in Questionnaire Research
- 5A.16 Data Analysis
- 5A.17 Conclusion

### **Unit 5B Introduction to Data Analysis I**

- 5B.1 Introduction to Data Analysis
- 5B.2 Probability Distributions
- 5B.3 Hypothesis Testing
- 5B.4 Conclusion

### **Unit 6A Fieldwork and Observation**

- 6A.1 What is Ethnography? An Overview
- 6A.2 The Emergent Nature of Research Design, Data Collection and Analysis
- 6A.3 Identifying the Research Topic and Conducting Fieldwork
- 6A.4 Roles and Relationships in Field Observation
- 6A.5 Note-Taking and Types of Research Notes
- 6A.6 Analysing Data and Writing Ethnographic Accounts
- 6A.7 An Overview of Action Research
- 6A.8 What is Participatory Action Research?
- 6A.9 Conducting Participatory Evaluation
- 6A.10 Data Analysis in Dissemination of Results in PAR and Participatory Evaluation

### **Unit 6B Introduction to Data Analysis II**

- 6B.1 Non-Parametric Analysis
- 6B.2 Simple Tests for Categorical Data
- 6B.3 Multivariable Analysis – Correlation
- 6B.4 Multivariable Analysis – Simple Linear Regression
- 6B.5 Conclusion

### **Unit 7 Validity and Reliability**

- 7.1 Introduction
- 7.2 Threats to Internal Validity
- 7.3 Threats to External Validity
- 7.4 Threats to Validity in Qualitative Research
- 7.5 Triangulation as a Solution to Validity Threats
- 7.6 Examples
- 7.7 Conclusion

### **Unit 8 Writing and Presenting Research**

- 8.1 Writing Research Proposals
- 8.2 Writing Research Reports
- 8.3 Ethics in Reporting Research
- 8.4 Evaluating Your Research Report

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## 5 Learning Outcomes

When you have completed this module, you should feel confident of your ability to conduct an effective research project – for an MSc dissertation, for your professional work or for personal interest. In particular, you will be able to:

- evaluate the relevance and application of the research methods introduced to answer different types of research question
- define and discuss the basic epistemological and ontological concepts related to intellectual enquiry
- analyse and critique the research of others
- choose an appropriate method for investigating your own research question
- carry out an effective and ethical research project – from the proposal initiation stage, through the literature search, data collection and analysis to the final writing-up and presentation of results
- analyse and present qualitative or quantitative data
- evaluate the validity of your own and others' research
- write up research effectively.

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## 6 Study Advice

The module consists of both philosophical material about the nature of knowledge and of enquiry and technical material about how to formulate research questions and answer them using a variety of techniques. We have illustrated both sorts of material by using examples of published research. We strongly recommend that you follow through the analysis and questioning of the published research to develop your critical skills. This will be useful to you not only when you complete your own research, but also when you use other people's research to assist your decision-making.

We have suggested that you choose which of the Units 5 and 6 to study, according to the sort of research you intend to do. You may wish to follow both A and B at a later stage if your research takes you in different directions, but for the purpose of completing the module within the two-month time period, we advise you choose either A or B.

While you are studying you will have access to the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Please use the VLE to contact your tutor or your administrator, and to discuss the module with your fellow students.