CHAPTER 2

Formulating and clarifying the research topic

Learning outcomes

*By the end of this chapter students should be able to:*

• identify the attributes of a good research topic;

• generate and refine research ideas to choose a suitable research topic;

• turn their research idea into a research project that has a clear research question(s), aim and   
 objectives;

• understand the relationship between a research question(s), a research aim and research   
 objectives;

• recognise the role of theory in developing a research question(s), a research aim and   
 research objectives;

• draft a research proposal that outlines their proposed research project. Summary

• The process of formulating and clarifying your research topic is a key part of a student’s   
 research project.

• Attributes of a good research topic do not vary a great deal between universities. The most   
 important of these is that the research topic will meet the requirements of the examining   
 body.

• Generating and refining research ideas makes use of a variety of techniques. It is important   
 that the student use a variety of techniques, including those involving rational thinking and   
 those involving creative thinking.

• Further refinement of research ideas may be achieved through using a Delphi technique,   
 conducting a preliminary inquiry and integrating ideas by working these up and narrowing   
 them down.

• A clearly defined research question expresses what the research is about and will become   
 the focal point of the student’s research project.

• A research aim is a brief statement of the purpose of the research project. It is often written   
 as a sentence stating what the researcher intends to achieve through their research.

• Well-formulated research objectives operationalise how the researcher intends to conduct   
 the research by providing a set of coherent and connected steps to answer the research   
 question.

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• It is important to use academic theory to inform the research topic irrespective of the   
 approach used to conduct your research project.

• A research proposal is a structured plan of the proposed research project.

• A well-thought-out and well-written research proposal has the potential to provide a clear   
 specification of the what, why, how, when and where of the research project.

Comment

Many students will have a general idea of what they want to do for their research project but   
little idea about how this may be turned into a research proposal that will meet the   
requirements of the examining institution. Chapter 2 is designed to start students thinking   
about the issues that will lead them to be able to produce a considered and feasible research   
design. As part of this, students will be likely to benefit from being encouraged to think   
about the material on the importance of theory in Section 2.4. The intention in writing this   
section was to highlight the significance of using theory in the project without engulfing the   
student in a complex debate. This is usually quite a barrier to overcome. However,   
overcoming it is usually very rewarding.

Student preparation

Students coming to the class should have read Chapter 2. As part of this, we provide them with the following questions to guide their note taking:

1. What is your proposed research topic?

2. Which of the attributes in Box 2.2 does your topic possess?

3. What research questions are suggested by your research topic?

4. What research objectives are suggested by your research topic?

5. To what literature does your research topic relate?

6. What are the key dependent and independent variables in your proposed study?

7. What possible relationships may exist between these variables and why would these be   
 important to explore?

In the classroom

We have found that effective sessions may be based on two linked sets of activities. Firstly,   
there is scope to discuss the answers students have noted in response to the student   
preparation exercise. Secondly this discussion may be used as a platform to lead to a series   
of activities involving:

• Refining research ideas and questions linked to techniques discussed in Chapter 2

• Refining or drafting research objectives to operationalise these refined research questions

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• Exploring and evaluating the way academic theory can be used to inform each research   
 topic irrespective of the approach that may be used to conduct the research project

• Thinking about starting to draft a research proposal.

Asking students to work in small groups to consider and compare their previously prepared   
answers, then to explore, evaluate and refine these, before making common themes from   
these the basis for class discussion has proved to be a useful format to run this type of   
session.

These activities will also link to subsequent chapters and classroom sessions. Locating appropriate academic literature will link to Chapter 3 and the session associated with this. Initial considerations in this session about the role of theory will also link to Chapter 4 and the session associated with this. Starting to draft a research proposal will link to Chapter 5 and the session associated with this. Thought may therefore be given to linking the activities in this second classroom session to those in the sessions that follow.

One additional possibility in running this session may be to explore types of variable and   
their role in devising theoretical propositions. With students working in small groups, we   
have asked each student to identify two variables related to their proposed research question   
and to distinguish between the dependent variable (e.g. sales turnover) and the independent   
variable (e.g. change of advertising strategy). From there we ask them to formulate a theory   
based on the relationship between these variables. These theories can be compared between   
members within the working groups.

Having formulated a theory, it is a short step to ask students to define a theoretical proposition. At each of these stages it is useful to list on a whiteboard worked examples from one nominated student from each group using the matrix below:

Research question(s) Dependent Independent Theoretical

variable variable proposition

The completion of this student exercise and post-exercise discussion will ensure a sound understanding of theory development and link to the use of a deductive research strategy as discussed in Chapter 5.

Finally, this session may also be used to consider the need to plan the use of students’ time over the life of their research project. Chapter 2 uses a Gantt chart to think about scheduling a research project (see Case 2). We have found that some students are sceptical about using a Gantt chart to plan their research project in this way. This scepticism needs to be overcome as students rarely allow sufficient time for the activities required to complete their research project. Chapter 3 of Sharp *et al*.’s (2002) book offers more detailed advice here and on the more general aspects of planning the research project.

Follow up work

Having made a start to the drafting of an outline proposal, we suggest that the most effective   
way this session could be followed up is by more work being done on the proposal.

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Students are likely to benefit from time spent on developing the background section. This will enable them to pull together many of the threads developed during the student preparation note-taking work and subsequent class work. The subsection ‘Progressing your research project’ may be helpful here.

Preparation of answers to the case study, ‘Helpful but not required: A student research proposal’ or for either of the earlier case studies associated with this chapter, which are available on the website (2a-2e), are also a useful follow-up to the session. This assumes that these cases have not been used instead as a classroom activity.

Alternatively one or more of the review and discussion questions may be used. Of these, Question 2.7 is concerned with considering what constitutes a good research topic whilst Questions 2.8 and 2.9 are concerned with developing research questions and objectives either from an academic article (2.8) or a television news bulletin (2.9).

Reference:

Sharp, J.A., Peters, J. and Howard, K. (2002) *The Management of a Student Research Project* (3rd ed) Aldershot: Gower.