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Research Methods for Business and Management

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Research Methods for Business and Management

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Research Methods and Dissertations

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Learning Objectives

When you have completed this module, you will be able to:

- list the similarities and differences between the day-to-day project work you carry out as a manager, and research project activity;
- distinguish between informal definitions of 'research' and more formal definitions;
- recognise why knowledge creation is usefully viewed as a social activity;
- identify that good research depends on the careful application of technique in execution and reporting, rather than unusual genius or expertise in the researcher;
- understand the approach taken in this workbook and the implications for the use you make of it, in the absence of a dissertation tutor, and depending on whether you intend to write a dissertation;
- understand the approach taken to assessment;
- state the ways in which the approach taken in this workbook matches the requirements of any professional body that may be involved.

1.1 Manager and Research

Here you are, towards the end of your Masters studies, reading a workbook about research. You're doing it for one or two reasons. It may be because you need to fulfil the formal requirements of a Master's Programme that involves a research project leading to a dissertation; or it may be because you have no immediate need to carry out research but you anticipate that some day you might. Let's call the first sort of person a Researcher – someone whose programme ends with a dissertation; and the second a Practitioner – someone whose programme doesn't carry this stipulation.

As you will see, both types of reader will be asked to plan an actual research project in some detail. This is because some knowledge of the research project process is a useful preparation for any professional management practitioner. The project activity will help you to integrate the material you have learnt in the other courses of this programme; it will allow you to think through, in depth, some of the detailed implications of what you have learnt in those courses as you seek to apply some of what you have learnt; and it will almost certainly lead you to challenge the applicability of some of that material *en route*. It will teach you new skills, and may enable you to position yourself for your next career move. None of your other courses is quite as effective as a research project in doing all this. At this point please turn to Appendix 2, which provides you with further briefing on the requirements of this case in the case of Researchers and Practitioners. Refer to "Introduction" and "An Approach to the Text" in detail, and skim read the remainder of the appendix.

Project work is, of course, an activity with which all managers are familiar, regardless of their role and function and regardless of whether they are members of a professional body. This raises two rather immediate and practical questions:

- Is a research project any different from any of the other kinds of project activity in which you engage?
- Why do you need a complete course in doing research? What, if anything, is there to be learnt?

1.1.1 What You Do When You're Doing Research

Let's address the first question here. All of the projects with which you are familiar have a number of characteristics in common:

- They are open-ended, in the sense that you can't anticipate all of the outcomes in advance.
- This may involve considerable uncertainty over those outcomes.
- There are almost always tight deadlines and some resource constraints.
- Achieving your intended outcomes requires you to devise and manage a process in which you prepare a plan of action and make decisions on the approach you intend to adopt.
- The way you do this differs from the way an administrator operates. Although you may find yourself using some specific techniques, you cannot reduce the whole process to a set of standard operating procedures, and you will need to take decisions and solve unexpected – and previously unspecifiable – problems as they arise along the way.
- One of the outcomes is that you become more confident about the answers to questions that your project has been addressing. This confidence depends on the adequacy of the argument which you are able to make (an **argument** being a set of assertions backed up with evidence). (By the way: words in bold that aren't headings may be new to you. They are defined at the end of the module in a Module Glossary.)
- But part of the project process is to make judgements about what counts as evidence in the first place. Will the evidence hold water? Does the outcome convince you? And rather more importantly, when required, will the conclusions convince other people?
- And, finally, there is a personal impact. All of this is sufficiently challenging that it stretches you while it's happening, and changes you to some small degree by the end.

So much for your day-to-day project work as a manager. The interesting thing is that all of these characteristics apply to the *research* project as well! You might argue that you're well equipped already to engage in research! So where's the difference? Do you really have to complete a course in order to do what you know how to do perfectly well already? The answer is 'yes', and the reasons reveal a lot about what's to come.

Let's examine some of the ways in which that word 'research' is used.

It's such a commonly used word, within business enterprises and elsewhere. Your boss asks you to 'research' the competency coverage and price of the psychological tests available from a range of suppliers. Next year's sales campaign for your firm may depend on the care with which a manager 'researches' an industry benchmarking study for the main items in your product line. Opposition politicians employ 'research assistants' to check what government ministers said when they were in opposition themselves. When your friend sets out to buy a second-hand car, he sees himself as engaged in a process of 'research' as he discovers where he might find the model he wants at a price that suits his pocket. Market 'researchers' stop you on the street to obtain your opinions about the latest soap powder as recently advertised. Can they all be referring to the same thing?

Perhaps the term is so frequently used because it's so vague. All of these examples of popular usage involve 'finding things out for a purpose', but, beyond that, there seems to be very little consensus about what is involved.

The people who make a living out of research, in contrast, tend to agree on some basic characteristics that make their work different from the layperson's.

1.1.1.1 Differences of Degree

The major differences are of degree. What the professional researcher does is seen as involving:

- more systematic data collection and interpretation. We all draw on our experience and try to make sense of it (see e.g. Kelly, 1955/91), but the professional researcher follows a publicly agreed system in a way the individual tends not to do.
- more focused and specific methods and objectives that are more than 'common-sense' (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2002). People in general tend to use plain reasoning and common sense when setting targets and getting down to a job; the researcher seeks to use methods and techniques that have known characteristics, strengths and weaknesses.
- greater care to avoid political and organisational biases than is often the case in 'ordinary' project work (Bryman and Bell, 2003: 4–5). Granted that no-one is completely free from bias, and that all behaviour is value-laden, nevertheless professional researchers use a range of robust techniques that minimise those biases they're aware of. They also subscribe to one or other code of research ethics, as we shall see in Section 2.6 and Section 6.5.
- the more deliberate, explicit, and self-conscious use of a theory to provide a background to the work undertaken (Anderson, 2004: 18). We all have personal theories and try to make our practice consistent with them (Kelly, 1955/91 again). Professional researchers use publicly shared theories, models and analytical schemes as the main organising frameworks to underpin their work.

All four factors, it should be emphasised, are matters of degree. We are not saying they are totally absent in the day-to-day project and completely present in the research project. (In fact, we shall see in Section 3.1.3 how the notion of 'the person as scientist' expresses one of the two fundamental assumptions about what research-based knowledge is and how it is developed by everyone, not simply scientists.) But they do help to give the day-to-day project and the research project their different flavours.

The theoretical underpinning, for example, may be invisible in a day-to-day project; it tends to be less explicit in practitioner research projects; but it is very deliberate and explicit in more academic research, including research aimed at the fulfilment of the membership requirements of the professional bodies. A day-to-day project about employee turnover and how it might be reduced may draw on assumptions about employee motivation and job satisfaction without setting out to contribute to those theories; or a MSc project that uses Belbin's Team-Role questionnaire (Belbin, 1981) to investigate optimal composition of new workgroup arrangements may carry forward assumptions about group cohesiveness and effectiveness that are implicit in Belbin's approach, without setting out to advance the theory of group effectiveness.

The implications for your own work are quite clear:

- You need to be systematic.
- Your objectives and methods need to be focused and sustainable.
- You have to avoid any bias or conflicts of interest.
- And you do need to address the theoretical underpinnings. The clearer you are about them (even if your intention is not, particularly, to advance the theory, but simply to contribute to professional practice), the better your work will be judged.

1.1.1.2 Differences in Kind

There are, in addition, some clear differences in kind and not simply of degree. All of the authors whose work has been mentioned emphasise that the overall purpose of a research project is not simple description or intelligence-gathering (an activity that Phillips and Pugh, 2000: 47–48 call the *what* questions), but the advancement of knowledge in a particular academic field or profession. By this, they mean addressing the *why* of the case:

- The findings don't just 'fit' with what is known already; they are interpreted in the light of existing knowledge, principles and published material in a way that allows for the development of new knowledge.
- The researcher seeks to understand why things happen better than s/he did before.
- Considerable attention is paid to **methodology**: the explicit and deliberate choice of an approach, method and techniques that will be best suited to identify and illuminate what is going on.

In other words, there is a feeling of progression, and of building on what went before. Academic researchers view their single investigation as part of an ongoing, never-completed process of continuing improvement in our understanding, rather than as the resolution of a one-off problem. The immediate outcomes of the investigation should be immediately obvious; but the longer-term significance may be different, as further research is carried out within the community of researchers.

This makes for a second major way in which your research work differs from your day-to-day project work. You have to interface with other people in a particular way. We mentioned earlier that the evidence used in any project activity, and the conclusions to which that evidence leads, frequently have to convince other people as well as yourself. In the case of research work, the issue is much more fundamental than that. The development of all knowledge is *in itself* a social process, and the outcome – new knowledge itself – is a social product, not a personal one (Berger and Luckmann, 1976). In a very deep sense, which we shall examine in more detail in Section 3.1, knowledge does not exist until you have reported on it. Of course, personal conviction matters. But we treat this social perspective very seriously, because it is your only protection against subjectivity, **solipsism** and cant – as we shall see!

1.1.2 What You Don't Do When You're Doing Research

All of this may suggest that research is a solemn and difficult undertaking. It's certainly an activity that's worth taking seriously, because a substantial proportion of your time is going to be involved, and for researchers this particular project is going to make the difference between your receiving the Masters qualification and not receiving it. Why waste all this time? The reason, as you will discover, is that it is in addition a fascinating activity, with people to whom you can turn for help along the way. There is substantial help available from them, sponsors and mentors; from this workbook; and from your own, existing resources. All of this will ensure that the activity is interesting and even enjoyable.

At this point, it should be emphasised that, if you go about it the right way, research is not particularly difficult. You are not setting out to win the Nobel Prize. With some help and some application on your part, you are perfectly capable of passing the exam, and, if a Researcher, of submitting a competent, worthwhile and even exciting **dissertation**! Genius is, of course, always welcome everywhere, but it is emphatically not an essential in this endeavour.

Your previous reading in support of your other courses (and particularly the journal articles and **empirical** accounts that you have reviewed) may have contributed to this false impression. It all looks so neat, complete, well planned and executed that it is very difficult to imagine that you will be able to produce work of this standard. As you look around your room right now at the resources you are only just beginning to think about using, and try to gather your scattered thoughts about the research project, it may seem difficult to believe that you can achieve anything quite so complete. This view is inaccurate, pernicious and unhelpful. In point of fact, *all* research begins in a state of uncertainty, and progresses to a state of greater organisation and systematisation as it is conducted, so that, by the time it is reported, a connected and sensible account can be written. One of the skills you will acquire from this workbook is how to bring order from chaos, using some standard techniques and conventions to organise your thoughts, plan and conduct empirical work, and write up your research contribution in a coherent and readable account.

1.2 Your Own Research Project

This course is designed to prepare you to carry out a research project, a process that starts right now and ends, in the case of Researchers, with the production of a dissertation in the form of a 12–18 000-word report that meets Heriot-Watt requirements and, where relevant, those of a professional body. Notice when the project starts! This workbook is designed in such a way that, when Researchers have completed all the suggested activities, they will have started the work on their dissertation and be well on the way to completion. The reasons for this assertion are twofold. First, it is much more interesting and productive to work with the real thing (your own research topic) than to cover the subject-matter in the abstract. Second, while there is no fixed period set by Heriot-Watt within which Researchers have to complete the dissertation, leaving the project activity until after you have completed this workbook creates an unnecessary delay.

And so, you should think of your work with this text, and your work on the project, as running concurrently with a substantial overlap. There is more information on this in Appendix 2, and if you have not already done so you should look at it now.

Some important assessment details for Researchers are also provided in Appendix 2. Of these, the most important to note are that:

- you need to be active in preparing yourself for the *Research Methods* examination, by working through the case study exercises in this textbook;
- since you are doing research without the help of an academic supervisor to act as tutor, you need to develop accuracy in self-assessment. This is done by a major exercise, the Research Proposal, which is begun in section 4.5 and completed in section 7.1.

1.2.1 Stages in the Research Process

As you go through this workbook, you will encounter material presented in the same order as it appears in a live research project. Figure 1.1 provides you with an overview of the stages involved.

As you can see, the overall process has been divided into two main phases, the project process and the research process proper, to match the two kinds of work, project management and scholarly activity, involved in any research programme. The first phase includes all those activities in which your research work draws directly on skills you already possess. This is basic project management of the kind with which you are familiar as a practising manager, but attuned to the needs of a research project. There are new things to be learnt, of course, but these are all local variants of procedures that are familiar to you.

The second phase contains much that is new. This may not be obvious at first glance, but as you look at the overview below, you will begin to appreciate some of the detailed ways, described in Section 1.1.1, in which research projects differ from more general management project activity and in which our usage of the term 'research' differs from the various informal usages described earlier.

The most important outcome of these two phases will be the decision about the empirical status of the dissertation. Will you be arguing a case that requires you to collect data within one or more organisations – the 'in-company' project – or will you do an industry-based project or a library project instead? The first is more common, but the last two are perfectly acceptable in those circumstances in which you cannot gain access to in-company information, provided you obtain prior approval as outlined in Appendix 2.

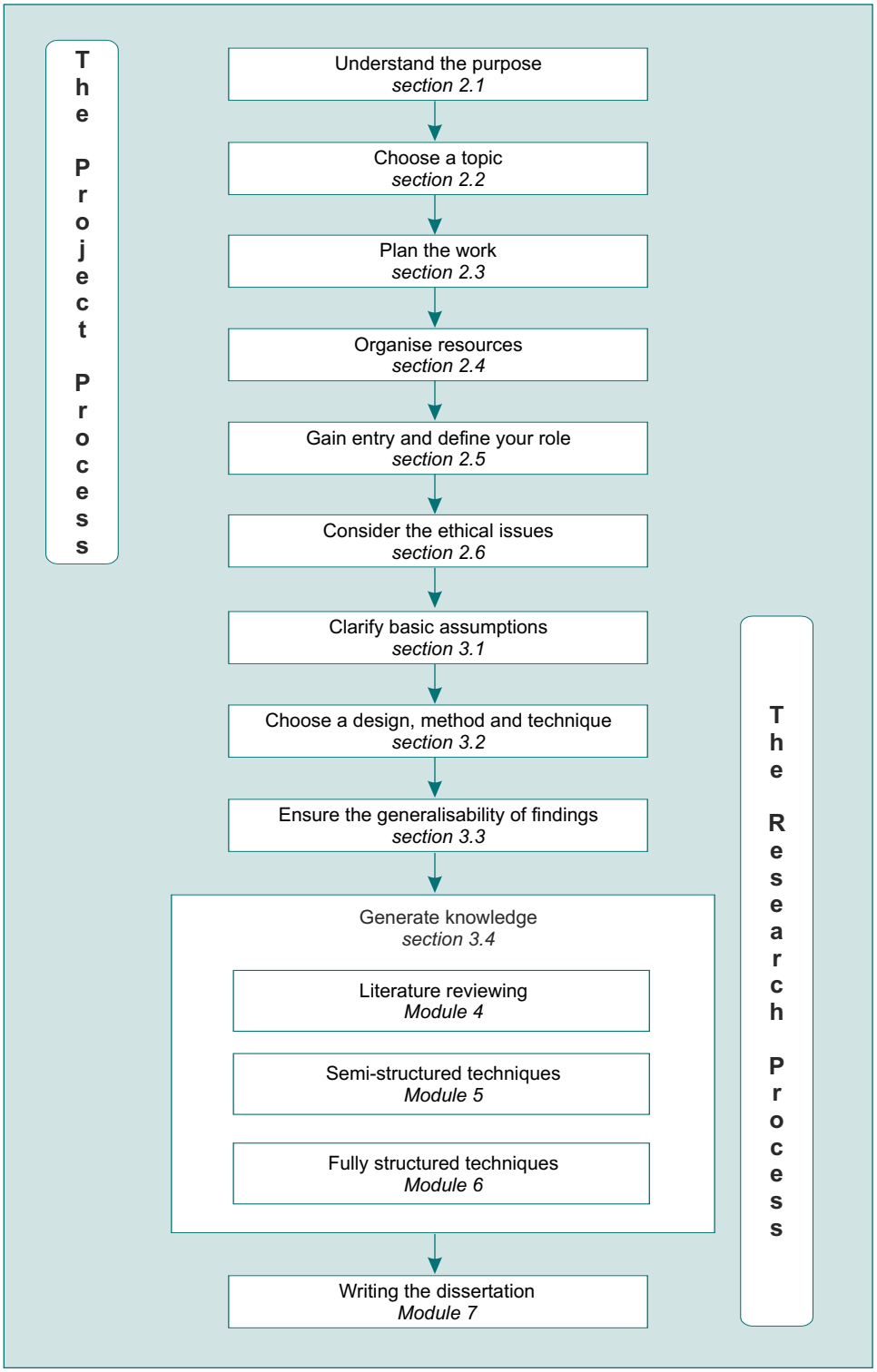

Figure 1.1 **The research process**

1.2.2 The Content of the Workbook

Module 2 explores the main project management activities; it deals with the 'hows' of research, from the initial stage in which you clarify the overall purposes of the project – why do one at all? – to the point at which you would be ready to present yourself, and what you are doing, to the people who will be helping you in various ways by acting as respondents, interviewees, **sponsors** and helpers. By this point, you have to be clear on what you are doing (the **research topic**); have a plan of work organised and resources arranged.

Module 3 deals with the 'whats' rather than the 'hows': the essential initial steps of your research work itself. Often neglected in the rush to start data collection, these steps are very important. They require you to clarify your basic assumptions, turn your research topic into a precise **research question**, choose an appropriate research strategy or design, select an appropriate research method and decide on the best way to collect data so that the conclusions are **generalisable** – that is, make sense outside the particular situation you have studied.

Module 4 deals with literature reviewing. This is the first step of the knowledge generation process that will provide an answer to your research question, by summarising what is known already and making an argument to support the questions you will be answering during the data collection phase. If you are not doing an in-company project, but an industry-based study or a library project, the argument you make in your literature review is crucial, because you will be answering your research question entirely from the published sources that you consult during this stage and will proceed straight to discussion, conclusions and write-up.

The remainder of the knowledge generation process then follows. Module 5 and Module 6 outline a range of techniques to be used for data collection and a variety of analysis techniques suitable for different research strategies and research methods. Finally, Module 7 deals with the writing and presentation of a dissertation.

1.2.3 Your Support Systems

The purpose of this workbook, then, is to prepare you to tackle a project and to act as a step-by step guide through the various processes and stages involved. It's your main support system. We shall examine additional types of support in Section 2.5; in the meantime, though, it is important to discuss one form of support arrangement that will not be available to you, and to outline exactly how the workbook will act as a substitute.

Unlike most of the students who study, research and do their project work by full-time or part-time attendance at a university or similar institution, you will not have a research supervisor or project tutor. In this respect, the *Research Methods* course is like all of the other courses you are following to gain your Masters degree: this is an e-learning/distance learning programme, in which your workbook materials and programme website are a substitute for the tutorial functions. Just as with the other courses, you will have:

- end-of-module multiple-choice questions with feedback;
- profiler multiple-choice questions that accumulate over the various modules to give you a more integrated form of feedback. This identifies areas of strengths and weakness, the latter to be addressed before tackling the Research Proposal exercise, which you cross check against a set of criteria provided in Appendix 2;

- ongoing case study exercises together with suggested solutions, which you should compare with your own solutions;
- final exam-standard case study exercises, which should be tackled last; you are asked to assess your answer to these by making a comparison against a model solution that is provided.

Additionally (and this is not provided in your other course workbooks), you will be provided with an action programme at the end of each module. As you can see from Table 1.1, this replaces the tutor's function in setting you learning tasks and monitoring your progress over time. It is essential that you engage in these activities. Researchers should do all of these and practitioners some, as indicated.

Table 1.1 How this text provides a substitute for a tutor

Tutor functions	Workbook replacement
Basic information and guidance	
• Tutor provides factual information against which the student can check their understanding	• (a) End-of-module multiple-choice questions, relatively easy, with answers explained
Coaching and support	
• Tutor sets simple, doable tasks to convey basics and build confidence	• (c) Ongoing case study exercises with suggested solutions to be compared with student's own solution
Formative feedback	
• Tutor sets standards by the kind of comments provided for more difficult tasks: expectations are conveyed, and remedial work suggested	• (b) Profiler multiple-choice questions set to a higher standard and keyed to the Final Research Proposal marking scheme; feedback given, remedial reading suggested
Problem-solving support	
• Helping the student think through issues as they arise	• (d) Final exam-standard case study exercises, feedback via model answer
Structuring and progress chasing	
• Providing a context and setting tasks within it, appropriate to the stage the student has reached	• (e) Action programme at end of each module, ensures student knows what stage should have been reached
Emotional support	
• Sympathy, understanding and constructive assistance when unexpected problems arise	• Unfortunately, this isn't possible. However, you should look in section 2.5 for suggestions on how you might arrange human equivalents

All five resources have been carefully planned to substitute, as far as is possible, for the functions of the research supervisor or tutor. There is, of course, no substitute for sheer human contact. There again, many students on full-time and part-time programmes make little use of the tutorial opportunities offered to them. It has to be said that, while they do pass, they tend to do more poorly than those who have used the tutorial facilities! This workbook is so structured as to provide you with a comparable level of support to the conventional programme students who make a full and good use of their tutors. Section 2.5.2 has some suggestions for human alternatives to the tutor, the sponsor and the mentor.

1.3 The Text and Your Business Specialism

This workbook has been written as a generic, albeit contextualised, text. It is *generic* in the sense that it is a comprehensive account of business research methods suitable for a Masters programme, and is a development of material aimed at a wide variety of business and management research projects outlined in Jankowicz (2005). It is also *contextualised*:

- by means of the examples, vignettes, and the tabular material, some of which are appropriate to management in general, but with many being geared to particular management functions (marketing, finance, logistics, strategy, HR and so forth); and
- by relating the content of the various case study exercises to these functions.

There may be also a professional link. Bearing in mind that some Masters programmes have, or may be seeking, accreditation from some of the professional organisations (such bodies as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, Chartered Institute of Marketing, Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport), if professional membership interests you, it would be useful for you to ascertain the current situation from the professional body concerned.

This can be done by obtaining a copy of the dissertation or project requirements, where they exist, from the professional body in question, and carrying out an informal mapping exercise in which you overview the material in this workbook, noting down material in the text which is especially relevant to the professional requirements. Table 1.2 provides a worked example, (in rather more detail than your own overview would require!), based on the requirements of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. You will find it helpful to arrive at something similar, to suit your own circumstances, if professional membership is a factor.

Table 1.2 **A worked example: How and where this text maps onto a professional body requirements**

Professional Body Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

Nature of dissertation

A Management Report of 7000 words focusing on an issue in professional HR practice. A typical MSc dissertation is a longer document of 12–18 000 words, which maps onto the CIPD requirements as listed below.

CIPD requirement as outlined in the CIPD professional standards specification (CIPD 2001); see also CIPD (2004).	**Section**
Performance indicators: Personnel practitioners must be able to…	
• identify a suitable project for their management report, in terms of its feasibility and relevance to an organisation, as well as to key issues in personnel and development	2.2
• plan and design a project that demonstrates an awareness of strategic issues and has the potential to make a contribution to improvements in organisational performance	2.3
• demonstrate a satisfactory knowledge of existing literature, of contemporary personnel and development practices, and of policy issues in the subject area chosen for the management report	4
• access and interpret data from primary and secondary sources in compiling material for their management report	4, 5, 6
• make appropriate and correct use of techniques such as interviews, questionnaires, participant observation and documentary analysis in gathering data for their management report	5, 6
• analyse the data that have been collected for their management report, by the use of qualitative and quantitative methods as appropriate	5, 6
• draw realistic and appropriate conclusions from their management report	7
• present their management report in a clear, logical and systematic manner in order to persuade key decision-makers of its merits	3.4, 7
• prepare a plan for implementing the recommendations made in their management report within a reasonable time-frame	4.3
• undertake a critical review of their management report and identify ways in which their project could have been undertaken more effectively	7
Knowledge indicators: practitioners must understand and be able to explain…	
• the rationale for their choice of project aims and management report	2.1, 2.2, 3.2
• the contribution that personnel and development can make to performance at an organisational, professional and societal level	2.1
• the nature and importance of a number of major issues in the existing personnel and development literature and contemporary personnel and development practice	4.1
• the range of primary and secondary sources from which information can be gathered for a management report	4
• the advantages and disadvantages of different research methods and their relevance to different situations	3.2
• the use and value of different analytical tools for interpreting data	3.1, 5.6
• the structure and content of a management report	3.4, 7.2
• the principal techniques of communication and persuasion that are used when writing and presenting a management report	7.3

Learning Summary

- Research project work shares a number of characteristics with the day-to-day project work in which you engage as a manager, but it also has characteristics that make it different.
- It follows that there is nothing particularly difficult about doing good research, so long as you carefully follow a number of principles and procedural guidelines, which this workbook sets out to convey.
- You should read this account in conjunction with Appendix 2.
- You will not have a project tutor, but you should be aware of the ways in which this workbook sets out to provide some of the support functions usually found in a tutor. This will require you to work through the usual multiple-choice questions and case study materials, noting the feedback provided; it will also require you to engage in project-related activities in the here and now as you progress through the workbook.

Action Programme

There is little for you to do at present. You've barely started! Just two activities.

1. **Use the feedback**
   (a) Build good habits. Make sure that you have worked through the multiple-choice items and the case study exercises, read the answers and understood the feedback before you progress to the next module. As you will appreciate from Table 1.1, this is your substitute for the tutorial process, and is an essential part of the learning experience.
   (b) Do something about your mistakes. If you can't understand the feedback, need explanations and aren't sure why an answer was wrong, then go over the text of the module until you have puzzled it out.
2. **Buy a research diary**
   (a) Researchers in particular should go into a stationer's shop and buy a simple A4-sized hardback notebook. You will use this for a great variety of purposes as you conduct your research, as we shall see in the next two modules. By the time researchers are ready to write up their research project, the diary will be a goldmine of information and resources.
   (b) A literal diary, i.e. something with pre-printed calendar dates on each page, is not a good idea since you won't be making entries every day. A thin accounts ledger is ideal.

Review Questions

Multiple-Choice Questions

1.1 Which of the following normally don't pertain in day-to-day *management* projects?

A. Some degree of uncertainty about outcomes.
B. Few limitations on the resources available.
C. A requirement for a plan of action.
D. The need for evidence to justify assertions.

1.2 Which of the following particularly characterises a *research* project?

A. The opportunistic use of whatever data comes to hand.
B. An openness to political and organisational influence.
C. A search for consistency regardless of theory: if it fits, it's right.
D. The use of previously researched principles and/or techniques.

1.3 'Solipsism' is defined as the view that:

A. knowledge is gained through personal experience.
B. you can only be certain about yourself and your own experience.
C. knowledge is gained through the development of abstract principles.
D. you can only be certain about findings that other observers can agree on.

1.4 One of the following information sources is *not* available to you as you progress through this course. Which is it?

A. A tutor.
B. A sponsor.
C. A mentor.
D. A workbook.

1.5 Which section of this text deals with the basic technique of literature searching?

A. Section 4.2.
B. Section 4.3.
C. Section 7.2.
D. Section 7.3.

1.6 Which three CIPD performance indicators are covered by Module 2 of this workbook?

A. Conducting a data analysis, drawing appropriate conclusions, implementation.
B. Accessing data, engaging in a critical review, reviewing the literature.
C. Using appropriate techniques, interpreting data, using quantitative methods.
D. Identifying a topic, planning and designing a project, presenting a clear written report.

1.7 How long should an MSc dissertation typically be?

A. 7000 words.
B. 12 000–18 000 words.
C. 22 000 words.
D. Length not specified.

Case Study Exercise 1.1: Reflections on the Knowledge Transfer Partnership Scheme

'Well, I suppose they have to keep their image up to date: the "Teaching Company Scheme" was beginning to sound… comfy but a little faded, wouldn't you say?'

'Yes, I suppose you're right, Peter,' was Alan Stevenson's reply. He was meeting Peter Enderby for lunch, and they were discussing the Scheme in its new guise: the Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) scheme. He and Peter had been collaborating for six years now, Peter as the MD of the English branch of a highly successful European manufacturing firm and Alan as the staff member in the Grantchester University Business School responsible for arranging student placements under the scheme.

Both appreciated the advantages the scheme offered. Under KTP, students were placed for one to three years to work on an in-company project, identified by the company, which had the potential to make a measurable contribution to business performance. The student gained valuable experience and the opportunity to collect data for a related research-based Masters degree; the university benefited from the opportunity of developing and transferring knowledge in a working environment, with occasional commercial benefits when mutually negotiated improvements were contracted or patented. As for the sponsoring company, there were both immediate and longer-term gains. They benefited from the student's time input on a project of their own choosing and from the university supervisor's consultancy expertise. In the longer term, as a recent TCS Evaluation Report had shown, 46 per cent of participating companies increased sales, 52 per cent increased in overall value, and 29 per cent reduced operating costs in ways directly attributable to the scheme (SQW Consultants, 2002).

'Mind you,' said Peter, 'I have to admire the ways in which you and your students find a research angle to some of the schemes. Take this one,' pointing to the KTP website printout that Alan had brought along; 'It got its grant approval last year, but I'm blowed if I can see how the student is going to get a higher degree out of it. I mean, I can see that it's a sensible enough project for the sponsoring organisation, so bully for them, but it doesn't look like a *research* project to me!'

Alan smiled as he replied. 'I can see what you mean. Actually, it's not as difficult as it sounds. Let me show you. Take a look at these three projects. One of them is recognisably a research project just as it stands. The other two could be turned into a research project very easily – all we have to do is remember the ways in which research projects differ from day-to-day management projects, look for those possibilities, and express them in the description.' He showed the list in Table 1.3 to Peter.

Table 1.3 Alan Stevenson's extract from the KTP Partnership database

No.	Knowledge base partner	Company partner	Partnership objective
49	Grantchester University	Handley Manufacturing Systems Ltd.	To integrate presently existing systems for manufacturing process progress and quality monitoring with a newly acquired automated HR information system comprising departmental rostering, compensation, employee competence data and training records.
95	University of Westlothian	Southern Borders Constabulary	To review and revise the composition and terms of reference of a Community Policing Committee to best accommodate the requirements of the community, the county constabulary, the local authorities and voluntary sector stakeholders, drawing systematically on stakeholder views to develop a social partnership model that would add to what is known about the success of such partnerships.
127	Bedfordshire University	Intego Design Associates	Taking charge of the quality aspects in a small but rapidly growing industrial design company, to identify employee competencies which will be required as the company expands and to prepare recruitment, development and succession plans.

1 In which one of the three objectives can you recognise a research project, just as it's stated?

2 What opportunities do you see for fine-tuning each of the other two objectives, so that they go beyond the description of a management project and demonstrate the attributes of a research project? (If you don't remember what these are, refer to Section 1.1.1.)

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Glossary

Argument: a set of assertions backed up with evidence.

Dissertation: in the case of researchers, the 12–18 000-word document that is the outcome of their research project activity. 'Project' is sometimes used as a synonym, but is best reserved to stand for the actual activity as distinct from the written outcome.

Empirical: results or outcomes based on observation and other forms of direct data-gathering; people who emphasise experience are known as empiricists. Contrasted with 'theoretical', which involves results or outcomes based on the use of principles and logic; people who emphasise theory in this way are known as rationalists.

Generalisability: you gather data in a company or from a particular situation, but there is little point in doing so unless your findings have more general relevance. For this to happen, you need to draw an appropriate sample, or arrange for appropriate replications in your data collection.

Mentor: someone who is sufficiently interested in what you are doing to keep up with your progress and act as a sounding-board for your ideas; ideally, a person who has done a professional management report or project him/herself.

Methodology: *not* a list of methods and techniques, but a careful and explicit account that argues for the suitability of the research approach taken: the research design, methods and techniques adopted.

Research topic: what your research is about: for example, 'improving the portfolio appraisal process', 'partnership in manufacturing organisations', 'improving our supply chain'. A topic can have several research questions that could be asked.

Research question: the particular question to which you seek answers in order to be successful in addressing your research topic. By and large you only ever work with one research question. For example, 'Are our difficulties with the appraisal system due to poor assessment instruments or poor user training?' might be one question within the 'appraisal' topic. 'How might our union get most from the proposed partnership agreement?' and 'What are the costs and benefits of taking ownership of some of our suppliers?' exemplify research questions within the other two topics.

Solipsism: a philosophical position that asserts that the only things one can be certain about are oneself and one's own direct experiences. It follows that the solipsist cannot tell, one way or the other, whether other people see things the same way as s/he does. Not a very useful belief if one takes the view that knowledge is a social product.

Sponsor: someone in the organisation in which you are collecting data (often your own company or workplace) who cares about what you are doing, hopefully because you have involved that person in choosing your *research question*. This role is not available in a project that is industry- or library-based; in either of these two cases, you would look for a *mentor*.

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