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Preliminaries

Recognizing Realities

The realities of your situation will strongly influence what you can do. For example:

☐ *What are the course requirements?* You need to know the formal specification for the project, often provided in a handbook. What type of project is expected – do you collect your own data or is a 'library' study expected? How and when is it to be presented – length, format, etc.? The general rule is – if they say 'these are the rules', then you follow them. There may be room for negotiation or interpretation if you feel that some aspect isn't appropriate for the project you want to do – but you must get this agreed before proceeding.

☐ *What are the expectations of your supervisor?* You should have access to a member of staff who provides help and support with your project, often called a supervisor. These people are human beings, and as such, will have their own preferences, expectations and even prejudices about what makes a good project. While the obvious strategy is to go along with them, the good supervisor should welcome your initiative if you come up with something different. If they are not amenable to your suggested approach, do remember that the supervisor will almost inevitably have substantially more experience than you. Follow their suggestions. With the experience of completing this project behind you, you will be in a better position to decide for yourself when you do later research.

☐ *What can you expect from your supervisor?* The amount of individual contact time that you can expect should be clearly specified. Three to four hours, spread out over the period you are working on the project, appear typical. Keep your appointments and prepare for them, armed with questions, problems and issues you want to discuss.

Making Preparations

☐ *Can the project be linked to your job or to one you are aiming for after your degree course?* In many professional courses, such links are the norm and will be organized by your supervisor. If you have come on to a course from a job in an organization which you plan to return to after the degree, or are doing the degree part time while keeping the job, it makes sense to link the project to the needs of the organization. This puts you in a strong position because it is in their interest to give you the support needed to enable you to carry out the project. You need to know why they want the work done, mainly so that you can frame the project in such a way that it stands a chance of answering their questions. But it is also so that you can satisfy yourself you aren't being asked to do something unethical (see 'Avoiding the unethical' Chapter 3, p. 76).

A serious warning

One of the commonest problems of novice researchers (and of experienced ones who should know better) is biting off more than they can chew. They under-estimate how long things take and over-estimate what they can do, with the time and resources that they have available.

Making it Worthwhile

Two main things make doing a research project worthwhile for you. First, completing it. Secondly, the skills and experience you gain from doing it. Completing it (which includes writing a report) helps justify the time and effort that you have put into it. An unfinished project means that you have effectively wasted your time, as well as the time of the people who have taken part.

Doing a project calls for a wide range of skills and gives valuable experience. These include:

☐ *process skills* – such as problem formulation and solving, use of data collection techniques, data analysis, etc.
☐ *presentation skills* – such as report writing, data presentation, audience awareness, etc.
☐ *management skill**s*** – such as project planning, time management, working with others, etc., and
☐ *personal skill**s*** – such as self-discipline, originality, ability to learn, acceptance of criticism, etc.

All of these can, of course, be made much of in your résumé or CV.

A successfully completed project puts you in a position to do better and bigger further projects. It is not uncommon for doctoral and other post-graduate research to have its roots in this first small-scale project. Mistakes and blunders can provide useful learning experiences. They will be etched on your mind, making their repetition highly unlikely (you will just make different mistakes – nobody is perfect!).

Be wary of using people as 'research-fodder'. If people take part in your project and give you time and attention, you should seek to make it worthwhile for them. This can be through:

☐ *Giving feedback.* The deal you agree when asking others to take part in your project (see Chapter 4, p. 91) should normally involve you under-taking to let them know something about your findings.

☐ *Letting them talk.* People are often pleased by someone showing an interest in them and relish the opportunity of talking to an interested person about themselves. So, don't just cut and run when you think that you have what you need for the project. Their spontaneous comments can be more interesting than the answers to your carefully crafted questions.

Considering Your Audience(s)

In one sense, you carry out the project for yourself, perhaps because you want to find out or understand something. One good reason is because it will help you gain a qualification, or further your career. However, other people come into the picture. You can think of them as audiences for your research. This is most obvious in relation to the report you will produce. Your examiners are a crucial audience. There will be a formal specification and you must make sure that you know what this is and stick to it. If it says 10,000 words, you stay very close to that limit.

Some research carries with it the notion, implicitly or explicitly, that, by carrying it out, you might help to change and improve some situation. It may be appropriate for you to provide a different, additional, report to that needed for the degree award. Perhaps something written for a senior management team in a business, or a report seeking to communicate with volunteers at a centre for young persons with learning difficulties. These issues are returned to in the final chapter.

Bearing audiences in mind is important at all stages of the project. Your supervisor forms an audience you want to please. If you are doing the research linked to your job, it is essential that you find out what your boss or line manager is expecting from the project. And that you plan something which could deliver this (or carry out a subtle re-education process where you persuade them that there is a better way).

Making Preparations

To get the active support that you need to carry out a successful project in an organization, it will help not only to have the top brass on your side, but also to be doing something which is potentially helpful to the workers (see the section on gaining access in Chapter 4, p. 91. More generally, whoever act as participants* in your study constitute an audience to take note of. Your interactions with them should show respect and consideration for their likely sensitivities.

Considering these multiple audiences influences the nature of your project. Some audiences only respect quantitative, statistical evidence. Others would take more note of rich qualitative data. If you have to satisfy both kinds of audience, you might have to use more than one method or approach, and possibly produce different reports for them. There is increasing interest in such 'mixed-method' projects.

Individual or Group Research?

There is much to be said in favour of collaborating with others when carrying out a research project. Research is very commonly a group activity and demonstrating that you have acquired the skills of working successfully with others is another marketable asset. However, many degree course regulations either insist on individual projects, or set strict limits on the type of collaboration which is allowed. Check this out.

Types of group research

Group research can take many forms:

☐ Forming a group with fellow students or colleagues where the research is jointly designed, carried out, and reported on. Decisions are reached via consensus. It is not an easy option, and is very risky unless you and the other group members have already got successful experience of working in this way. This approach is rarely permitted by course regulations, in part because of the difficulty in assessing the individual contributions of group members.
☐ Forming a group where several people are interested in the same broad topic and, through discussion, carve out related projects. Details of the design and other aspects of each project are the responsibility of the individual concerned, with other members of the group giving advice

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* The term 'participant' is now widely used to refer to those taking part in a research project, rather than 'subject'. See Chapter 4, p. 86 for a discussion of this issue.

and support at all stages. The quality of your project is likely to be enhanced by linking the discussion, and findings, to those of other group members. Providing that you clearly signal which parts are your own work and which that of others, it would be unreasonable for course regulations to prohibit this form of group working (but they might do).

☐ Forming a group with persons having a role in the setting where your research takes place. This applies particularly when your project involves evaluating a programme, intervention, innovation, or whatever, where there is much advantage in involving the personnel concerned. For example, a project which is focused on problems and issues which they feel are important, is much more likely to get their active coopera-tion than trying to persuade them to go along with your own pet ideas (see Robson, 2000; Chapter 2, for more details about the advantages of this kind of collaboration in evaluation research).

Support groups

Even when everyone wants to do their own thing, and the proposed topics are very various, forming a mutual support group is well worthwhile. Group members will have different strengths and perspectives and will be able to offer comments. Towards the completion of the project, reading of each other's draft reports is very valuable. It is a good idea to agree ground rules for the group at an early stage – see Box 1.1.

Box 1.1 Issues for support groups

☐ Do you need/want a leader/organizer? If so –

    ☐ What are their responsibilities (e.g. calling meetings; moderator; keeping records)? and
    ☐ Does the role rotate?

☐ Do you have an agenda with pre-circulated material – or free discussion?

It is good to have:

☐ Regular meetings with attendance accepted as a priority, and
☐ Agreement to keep to constructive criticism and comments.

Making Preparations

Supervisor support. If, for whatever reasons, you are forced to do an individual project, don't despair. Your supervisor should be a major resource. They want their students to succeed (partly, though hopefully not solely, because it can take a lot of their effort to help get an unsatisfactory project up to standard). If you are not getting the support you are entitled to, there should be mechanisms for remedying the situation. Be reasonable though. They are busy people and you have your part of the bargain to fulfil through attendance and involvement. Some institutions have moved toward small-group rather than individual supervision sessions with promising results, partly because they provide a setting where students can discuss each other's work and provide mutual support (Akister, Williams & Maynard, 2009).

Web-based discussion and other groups. You could also consider ways of getting involved in, or forming, a group via the internet. There is a myriad of discussion groups and other web entities through which you can get advice, and possibly also get in touch with persons in a similar situation as yourself. I have been very impressed by the way in which established researchers are willing to give advice to those less experienced, in discussion groups on a wide range of research-related topics. The usual warnings and safeguards about internet activities apply (see Chapter 3, p. 69).

Planning Your Project

The checklist on p. 6 provides a set of planning milestones. It is self-evident that you need to sort out a focus or *topic* for your project. Coming up with a set of non-trivial *research questions*, which are answerable given the time and resources you have available, is a very useful way of giving a shape to your efforts.

Your *research design* is the way you have chosen to try to get answers to these research questions. This includes the research methods, such as questionnaires, interviews, observation, documentary analysis, etc., which you decide to use. It also refers to your overall approach to the research. There are very different styles, or strategies, of research ranging from a tightly controlled experimental design collecting quantitative (numerical) data, to ethnographic approaches relying on participant observation and producing largely qualitative (non-numerical, usually verbal) data.

Once you have a clear idea of your research questions and design, you can give serious attention to the ethical issues which could arise and seek any approvals for access needed without delay. When these issues are settled satisfactorily, you are in a position to draw up your project outline and timetable listing all the stages needed to complete the project.

Doing it

After planning comes action. You move on to actual data or information collection. Reliance on existing information (sometimes referred to as documentary analysis, or library research) is a fully legitimate form of research activity and is the norm in some fields or discipline. However, much research involves active data collection (sometimes referred to as primary data collection), whether inside or outside a specialist laboratory. Non-laboratory, or 'field' research, has its own challenges which often call for good social skills, as well as skills in using the research methods.

Writing the project report is an essential part of the whole exercise. However, before you can write it, you need to know what you have found. Collected data typically do not speak for themselves. You have to make them talk. This process of achieving understanding of what you have found through analysis and interpretation is often presented as difficult and highly technical. It can be, and you may need specialist help, but often a simple analysis is preferable.

The Structure of the Book

The book is in three parts. The first covers the things you need to get sorted out in advance. The second covers practical aspects of collecting your data. The final part discusses what to do with the data when you have collected them.[*]

In Part I, following the preliminaries discussed in this first chapter:

☐ Chapter 2 tries to help you appreciate some possible approaches to people-focused research and the range of methods you might consider to collect data.
☐ Chapter 3 is concerned with selecting a topic, and getting you to the stage where you have an initial set of research questions; then what overall approach or style of research and method(s) of collecting data will be best fitted to get you answers.

Part II is:

☐ Chapter 4, and covers the practicalities of actually collecting data.

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[*] Strictly speaking, 'data' are plural – the singular is 'datum'. However, language use changes and it is now often treated as a singular noun. I prefer the plural, but unless your course handbook gives a ruling on which you should use, it's up to you. Be consistent once you have decided.

Making Preparations

In Part III:

☐ Chapter 5 focuses on what to do with the data, and
☐ Chapter 6 deals with report writing and other ways of disseminating your findings.

This is, I hope, a logical, and understandable, sequence. However, it may give the mistaken impression that research is a tidy, essentially linear, process where one moves through the various stages and the report pops out at the end. In practice, it is often much more messy and interactive than this. You may find that there are constraints or limitations on what is possible, which crop up at a late stage and force you to change tack. Or, an opportunity to do something different comes out of the blue. Your reading, or discussions with colleagues or a supervisor, or what you get from participants, may make you realize that what you had proposed was wrong-headed. Pilot studies may reveal that you have grossly under-estimated the time things take, etc., etc. (see Chapter 4, p. 97).

Specific 'non-linear' aspects to consider include:

☐ Being prepared to revisit your initial research questions and revise them in the light of the way things are turning out. At one extreme you may find, towards the end, that you have found answers to different questions! Be grateful for such mercies.
☐ Sorting out any arrangements for access as soon as you are reasonably certain of the nature of your project, and of any access needs.
☐ Ensuring that your design is such that you will be able to carry out any analyses you need to do (e.g. that sample sizes are large enough for particular statistical tests to be possible). This means that you need to know how the data will be analysed before they are collected.

It is never too early to start writing. Don't leave it all to the end. Drafts of substantial chunks can be done along the way. Many potentially highquality projects are ruined by a mad scramble to complete the analysis and the report, trying to meet what has become an impossibly tight deadline.

End of Chapter Tasks

Each of the chapters is followed by a set of 'tasks'. These are suggestions about things to do, arising from the material covered in that chapter.

Whether you complete all, or even any of them, is obviously up to you. My recommendation is that you:

☐ *Start the Chapter 1 tasks now*, or at least as soon as practicable.
☐ *Then read through the whole of the book* so that you get a feel for all aspects of completing the project. Don't worry at this stage if you don't follow everything. Note the tasks and by all means give some preliminary thoughts about what you might do, but don't actually complete them.
☐ *Return to the beginning and*, working in 'real time' (i.e. the time dictated by the requirements of the project) *go through the chapter tasks* broadly in sequence, re-reading material in the chapter as necessary. It may make sense to combine tasks for different chapters depending on how things work out.

Further Reading

It's a good idea to start by reading the rest of this book. Do it as rapidly as you can. There are plenty of suggestions for other books to consult as you go through the following chapters.

🕸 *The website (www.wiley.com/college/robson) gives links to general materials useful when thinking about your project*

Chapter 1 Tasks

1 *Get a Project Diary.* This is a notebook in which you enter a variety of things relevant to the project. It can take many different forms but I like to have a nice quality one with hardback covers and not just a loose-leaf writing pad. I suspect that, psychologically, if you have invested in something like this, it gives an added impetus to keeping a quality record. Who knows, it might be the start of your career library of project diaries. An alternative is to have the equivalent of this diary on your computer (make sure you keep back-ups). The kinds of things which might be entered into your diary include:

☐ Notes of all meetings and data collection sessions relating to the project – particularly of meetings with a supervisor. If the data or full notes are somewhere else, give details of where they are.
☐ Appointments made, and kept.
☐ Notes from library, internet and other information gathering sessions.

Making Preparations

☐ Memos to yourself about any aspect of the project – what you are proposing to do, and why.
☐ Notes about the modification of earlier intentions and why they are made.
☐ Responses to the later tasks in the book.
☐ Reminders of things to be done, people to be chased up, etc.
☐ Taking stock of where you are; short interim reports of progress, problems and worries, memos to yourself of bright thoughts you have had (get it down before you forget!), suggestions for what might be done.

The diary can be invaluable when you get to the stage of putting together the findings of the project and writing the report. It acts as a memory jogger and an invaluable brake on any tendencies to rewrite history. It is, in itself, a learning tool for future research projects.

2 *Start using it.* In particular it will be useful if you can write down a short account of your initial thoughts about the project you are hoping to do (don't worry if you are not at all sure at this stage – it's what you do by the end that counts). Half a page, or so, is enough. There is a lot to be said in favour of doing this before reading further in the book as it will then be possible for you to look at it later, and gain insights into how far you have travelled in the process of doing the project.

3 *Investigate possibilities for collaboration.* If the idea of carrying out your project on some kind of group basis interests you, then now is the time to find out what may be possible:

☐ Is it allowed? Are there regulations or rules that forbid group work – or particular kinds of group work? Find out.
☐ Are there other students you could work with? If so, get together and sort out what kind of group you can agree on. Get started by sharing ideas on what topic(s) you might go for.

Even if a group project of some kind is not possible, for whatever reason, everyone can benefit from being part of a *support group*. Set one up now.