

## MBA Research Methodology Topics 3 and 4

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The most relevant parts of Blaxter *et al.* for these topics are chapters 2 and 4

### Topic 3: The role of existing literature in social science research

Why do you need to do a literature review?

- to identify a suitable research topic

*An initial scan of the subject-specific literature might give you interesting ideas for dissertation topics. Indeed the available literature often **explicitly suggests** directions for future research – ie, issues which still need to be explained or explored - which could be especially helpful in choosing a dissertation topic.*

- to contextualize your research topic

*The literature review allows you to inform your assessors about how your research fits into what has been previously published on the topic: it should outline the existing ideas and themes that you want to focus on in your work, and therefore allow you to identify relevant academic material to use in analysing the specific empirical site you are interested in.*

- to identify your research question/s - finding specific concepts, theories, models and findings to explore

*Relatedly, a comprehensive literature review helps to **narrow** your research topic down into your research question/s – what seem to be the key concepts, theories, models and findings emerging from this body of work? What **precisely** is it about organizational structure, Total Quality Management, organizational culture, relationship marketing, charismatic leadership, stress, productivity, employee motivation, the efficient market hypothesis, the supply chain, auditing or whatever else that **you** want to research?*

- to demonstrate your subject knowledge

*As established in the notes for Topic 1, one of the reasons we ask you to do a dissertation is to enhance your subject-specific knowledge.*

- to identify your contribution

*An effective literature review helps you to avoid simply replicating or repeating existing studies because it identifies the **limitations and gaps** in the existing literature. Your dissertation should aim to address these limitations and gaps either empirically or by evaluating/ synthesizing literature in new ways. Making a contribution means researching something which has not been studied before or has not been studied very extensively, adding to or extending what already exists on the topic, combining bodies of thought or viewpoints in different ways, researching a topic in an unusual way etc. It is a requirement in PhD theses but, to a lesser extent, in Masters dissertations as well. **Original work does not just rehearse old arguments to reach already established conclusions. It avoids well worn topics and/ or uses***

***samples which have not been researched in detail before and/ or employs unconventional research methods. It will always be more sympathetically received by your assessors.***

- to help you decide on your methodology

*Reading the available literature in a particular subject area or areas may also help with your methodological decisions. This can take two forms – firstly, there may be a tried and tested methodology which is effectively the ‘standard’ in a particular area of research and which you can justify using on that basis. Secondly, and alternatively, it may be that most or all researchers in a subject area use one particular methodology but you feel you can make a contribution and look at the subject from a new angle by choosing a different approach. For example, one of the authors of these notes decided to use semi-structured interviews in her doctoral research on sexual harassment, because once she had read a range of the available literature on this topic it became clear that most sexual harassment researchers used SAQs.*

- to ensure your research is of contemporary interest

*Your literature review, which should be ongoing throughout your dissertation research, allows you to keep abreast of your subject area and to be aware of any important new developments. An effective literature review therefore ensures that your work will be seen as significant by **today’s** management academics and practitioners.*

To summarize the above points, the important thing to remember is that “Knowledge does not exist in a vacuum, and your work only has value in relation to other people’s. Your work and your findings will be significant only to the extent that they are the same as, or different from, other people’s work and findings.” (Jankowicz, 2005: 162)

#### **NB** Literature review versus secondary data in empirical studies

*As suggested in the introduction and the notes for Topic 1, some of you will be using secondary data to answer your research questions – ie, data that already exist, that someone else has collected. But there is still a difference between a literature review and the use of secondary data in dissertations. A literature review summarizes the academic material on the subject area in terms of setting the context for your dissertation and clarifying your contribution, as discussed above. It therefore forms part of the **background** to your research questions – which area/s of the academic literature are you deriving your inspiration from? which gaps or omissions in this material is your research intended to address? A literature review often makes reference to other people’s empirical data and findings in setting this context. It should usually precede your methodological discussion and your data analysis, as in the conventional structure laid out in the notes for Topic 1. A data analysis which makes use of secondary data on the other hand deploys such data as a direct means to answer **your research questions – ie, as empirical data** – not as background or context as above. It should follow the methodology and precede the conclusions, recommendations and reflections. There are therefore different emphases here in terms of how other people’s data might be used in a dissertation.*

## Finding the literature

Trawling is “a wide overall review of the literature in a specific field”; fishing on the other hand means that “[the researcher] will know exactly the articles that she wants and simply need to retrieve them” (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2002: 161)

*Your initial scan of the literature will probably consist of trawling – as comprehensive an overview as you can manage of the relevant material. As you proceed through the dissertation and your focus and ideas become clearer, you will probably need to ‘fish’ for specific issues, theories etc. about which you want to know more.*

Use reading lists but also do your own searches

*Initial reading suggestions may come from ULMC reading lists from the modules you have already studied, but also from lists from other courses you have done at undergraduate or postgraduate level. But you will also need to do your own searches to make your review as comprehensive as possible, and therefore to be familiar with relevant University of Leicester resources like the online databases etc. Identification of key authors and seminal contributions is also especially helpful at the start of the process. For example, a dissertation on organizational structure would be expected to make reference to the very important, if controversial, work of Max Weber on bureaucracy. Similarly, a dissertation on cross-cultural differences in employee behaviour would be expected to note and discuss the (equally controversial) work of Geert Hofstede in this regard. Review articles also appear from time to time in the management journals, discussing a particular body of literature and the relevant developments in this area – again these are good resources for starting your literature review. And of course you can follow up references from texts you have already read by using the bibliographies in those texts.*

If you are having difficulty finding material which is specific to your needs, consider broadening your parameters:

- language

*You are free to use literature which has been published in languages other than English for your dissertation, as long as it is relevant to your research and you translate both the ideas in these texts (including direct quotations) **and** the necessary references into English in the finished product.*

- subject area

*Many of you will find a lot of useful material in disciplines which are associated with management – like sociology, psychology, media studies, cultural studies, history, philosophy, politics, international relations, anthropology etc.*

- business sector

*As a hypothetical example, say you want to do research on charismatic leadership in hotels, but can't find much literature on this issue. So you could look for literature that deals with charismatic leadership in other business sectors, and draw the relevant parallels to the hotel sector as well as acknowledging the probable differences.*

- geographical area

*Again, there may be very little on the recruitment and selection of information technology professionals in China (your hypothetical chosen subject), but perhaps there is lots of material on the same subject in other geographical areas*

– the UK or the US for example. Once more, the relevant parallels can be drawn, and differences identified.

... etc.

*And remember that if there isn't very much on your specific topic area this suggests you have been successful in identifying something which is genuinely original!*

In sum, “[y]ou should not be limited by the research (and research questions) current in the specific field you are researching. Researchers in other fields and from other disciplines may well be wrestling with problems similar to yours, or from which useful parallels can be drawn.” (Robson, 2002: 57)

Various kinds of sources and some comments ...

... reports, conference proceedings, theses and dissertations, journals, textbooks, monographs/ edited books, newspapers, the Internet, radio programmes, television programmes, library catalogues, encyclopaedias, databases, bibliographies etc.

- *Reports would include things like Mintel market research reports, government reports on specific issues or even company annual reports.*
- *Books include textbooks which cover the basic information about a range of topic areas, but usually in a rather superficial way. We expect you to go beyond these sources to monographs or edited books (the latter are collections of chapters by different researchers on the same topic), because these sources will report particular research projects in the kind of detail and complexity which a Master's dissertation literature review needs to encompass. Also note that material in books tends to be more out of date than material in journal articles because books take longer to publish.*
- *For journal articles, we expect that the majority of your sources will be academic, refereed journals like the Journal of Management Studies, as opposed to trade or professional journals such as People Management (the UK Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development publication for its members).*
- *Newspapers, radio and television programmes are also acceptable as sources for a literature review, but obviously differ in quality. We would expect you only to use 'respectable' sources like the UK broadsheets (eg, The Times, The Guardian and The Telegraph) or their television or radio equivalents (eg, the BBC stations Radio 4 and Radio 5, or the BBC World Service). Many newspapers are available online for free, and you can also access and search several media sources via the e-newspapers link on the University of Leicester library home page (<http://www.le.ac.uk/li/sources/news/newspapers.html>). Also remember that media of this kind typically display political bias.*
- *Sources like library catalogues, encyclopaedias, databases, bibliographies and so on are what we call 'tertiary' sources – they are not literature in themselves but they provide lists of the relevant literature in a subject area/s.*

Please try to read originals wherever possible and don't over-rely on the Internet

*If a particular issue or author is central to your research – eg, bureaucracy or cross-cultural differences in employee behaviour – then we would expect you to read Max Weber or Geert Hofstede, not just to rely on how other authors describe their work. Regarding the use of the Internet, unless the source you have accessed is either a downloaded academic journal article, a newspaper article, an official company website or a government website then you need to be very careful about using it – can you really vouch for its integrity? is it really likely to be a reliable and accurate source of information?*

Some quick tips on electronic searching:

- use different ways to describe your topic

*Using various ways to describe the topic helps to ensure your search is exhaustive. For example, if you are interested in Total Quality Management, you might also want to search on ISO9000, BS5750, benchmarking and/ or BPR for relevant literature. Another example is that a search for material on downsizing might also include the use of search terms like ‘redundancy’ or even ‘derecruitment’.*

- remember that there is UK English and US English

*Not only do UK English and American English spell words differently (eg, the UK ‘behaviour’ and the US ‘behavior’), but they also use different words for the same thing (eg, a UK chemist is a US drug store). If you don’t have any luck with one version of English in a particular search, try the other version.*

- what about acronyms and abbreviations?

*A search facility might not recognize acronyms or abbreviations like ICI or TQM or BPR.*

Finally remember that, for general enquiries concerning the Library and its services for distance learners, please complete the online enquiry form at [http://www.le.ac.uk/li/distance/enquiry/reference\\_form.htm](http://www.le.ac.uk/li/distance/enquiry/reference_form.htm)

If you require help in finding subject information, you can also e-mail Brian Marshall

*Brian is our Management Information Librarian and can be contacted on [bem1@le.ac.uk](mailto:bem1@le.ac.uk).*

And note Robson’s (2002: 52) observation that “My experience has been that quite often when key words have indicated a specific journal article, adjacent articles in the same journal have been of greater interest or relevance.”

## **Using the literature**

Writing a literature review is a continuing process

*As implied above, putting together a literature review entails you reading the relevant material and drafting a review fairly early on in the dissertation process, but doing further searches to update your review and ensure it is comprehensive as you go along. Especially keep an eye out for new journal papers, books, newspapers etc.*

When taking notes ...

- read as widely as possible ...

- ... but also be selective

*First look at the title, the back cover 'blurb' and/ or the introduction if it is a book, or the abstract if it is a journal article. Ask yourself, do I need to read this? The following questions might help: does it relate to your research interests – is the context or content of the text relevant to what you are researching? might it have been superseded by something more recent? or is it a 'classic' or seminal text? do other authors refer to it frequently? and what are its likely omissions and limitations? Also be aware that in some subject areas – eg, company performance or economic statistics - the published material changes very quickly, while in others it is much slower to change – eg, theories of employee motivation.*

- for books, use contents pages and indexes

*Don't just start at page 1 and keep reading until the end of the book – use the contents pages and indexes to ensure that you read the parts or chapters of these texts that are relevant to your dissertation.*

- keep your research questions in mind when taking notes

*Keep asking yourself, can I use this material to explore my area of interest and if so how? Record stuff which is relevant, not everything every author says.*

- use your own words

*Again when taking notes, write them in your own words as far as possible. If you do want to use the author's own words, then make sure you record the relevant section as a direct quotation using speech marks, and take the page number down. Failure to do this could mean you being accused of plagiarism because chunks of other people's words will probably end up without the appropriate attributions in your work.*

- record all the necessary referencing information

*Ensure that you take down all the relevant details for referencing purposes as you make your notes from each text – eg, page numbers for direct quotations and dates accessed for Internet sites. See*

*<http://www.le.ac.uk/ulmc/students/assignwritingguidelines.pdf> for detailed guidelines on how to reference. It's also a good idea to keep a 'running' bibliography/ list of references – ie, add to it as you read each text, to avoid a mad panic just before submission when you can't find a text that you have used!*

- formulate a working structure/ make comparisons between texts as you take notes because "[t]rying to read everything then trying to write it up is a daunting task ... it is unlikely you will appreciate the significance or possible location in the review of what you have read without some point of reference provided by a working structure." (Gill and Johnson, 2002: 26) ...

*As you read and take notes from the texts, think about how the text you are reading compares to others you have read. What are the main themes, concepts or claims that are emerging? What are the areas of agreement and disagreement between different authors in this regard? If you do this then you should be able to develop your notes into an effective literature review. **It is really important to remember that the literature review is just that; a review. In other words, it should not be a list of authors or texts which reads 'X says, Y says, Z says'. The idea is to present an overview of the literature which deals systematically with the main themes, concepts, claims and areas of agreement or disagreement between authors in this body of material.***

... and here is an example of a systematic approach to a literature review, using the gender and management literature

*In other words, if you were writing a dissertation on the ways in which men and women manage, then we would expect it to be structured along the following lines. This would require you to have identified the two broad 'camps' in the available academic literature and therefore to organize your review in something like this format.*

'Camp 1' in the gender and management literature suggests that men and women manage differently because they are socialized differently – eg, Rosener (1990, 1997); Helgesen (1995); Fagenson (1993)

*Rosener (1990) for example asked managers to describe their managerial style. Her findings show that men said they adopted a 'transactional' leadership style, based on the principle of exchange – in other words they gave their staff rewards or punishment for work done well or badly. These men also reported that they relied on positional authority in order to manage others – eg, telling staff that they had to obey orders because they came from a manager. Women on the other hand reportedly used 'transformational' leadership - motivating staff through persuading them to commit to group/organizational goals, encouraging them to participate in decision making, managing through personal qualities rather than by position, and trying to make staff feel good about themselves. Rosener also says these gender differences in management style are due to the differences in the ways boys and girls are brought up, and she concludes that transformational/ 'feminine' leadership is likely to be more successful in economically turbulent times than the transactional/ 'masculine' style. In her 1997 piece she extends this argument by suggesting that key to maintaining America's corporate success and global competitiveness is to put women in senior positions in organizations, because their management style increases productivity, innovation and thereby profits through their aptitude for ambiguity and willingness to empower others. Fagenson (1993) summarizes the available research on gender and management styles – she agrees with Rosener that the evidence indicates women prefer a transformational, interdependent style of leadership, instead of using status (like men). Helgesen (1995) echoes Rosener and Fagenson – her research suggests that gendered management styles develop as a result of differential socialization, and that women managers are consequently better at developing creativity, cooperation and intuition in others than men. Fagenson also emphasizes women's preference for managing via relationships as opposed to hierarchical position, and says that women listen and empathize much more than men. Again she asserts that feminine leadership 'principles' are becoming more influential because they suit today's corporate realm better than male 'warrior values'.*

'Camp 2' in the gender and management literature suggests that, if men and women do manage differently, it is not just because of gender socialization - eg, *Harvard Business Review* (1991); Gherardi (1995); White (1995)

*In the Harvard Business Review article, Epstein (1991: 151) points out that her own data from the legal profession and indeed her own experiences suggest women frequently display 'combative', 'punitive' and 'authoritarian'*

(i.e., 'masculine') behaviour. She also notes 'in-work' variables like organizational size and culture as influencing management style, plus draws our attention to additional non-organizational variables in this regard like age, class and ethnic differences. Cohen, in the same article, argues that Rosener overlooks the fact that many of her female managers were responsible for professional staff who probably disliked a very directive, 'masculine' managerial approach. And if we overemphasize gender differences in management theorizing, asks Gherardi, how can we account for those men who prefer to manage in more democratic ways – like the 52% of male managers who said they preferred to use teamwork and a participative management style when surveyed by the British Institute of Management? White's (1995) research into female executives also suggests these women were more different in their approach to leadership than they were similar. White attributes these differences to varying ages, experiences and expectations amongst this group.

However, despite the trend in empirical evidence, it is 'camp 1' that predominates (Alvesson and Billing, 1997: 145)

*Most writers on gender and management, as Alvesson and Billing point out, argue that there are gender differences in management style. On the other hand, "the majority of the academic **empirical** work supports the no-or-little-difference thesis" (Alvesson and Billing, 1997: 145 – emphasis added).*

When beginning to write up ...

- again, focus on your research questions
- remember that the literature review should be organized around themes, not presented as a list - so avoid:

"the furniture sale catalogue, in which everything merits a one paragraph entry no matter how skilfully it has been conducted: Bloggs (1975) found this, Smith (1976) found that, Jones (1977) found the other, Bloggs, Smith and Jones (1978) found happiness in heaven." (Haywood and Wragg, cited in Saunders *et al.*, 2003: 48)

- cover all sides of the relevant arguments
- as in the example from the gender in management literature discussed above – ie, that some authors believe there are gender differences while others disagree, but that the 'differences' camp predominates despite the bulk of empirical evidence.*

In terms of structuring the finished version (and see Jankowicz, 2005: 164 for a useful example)

*This example is actually taken from an imaginary MBA project on leadership training in negotiation and sense making skills.*

- move from the general to the specific as follows
- give a short introduction laying out what the chapter will do

*That is, 'topping' as discussed in the notes on Topic 1.*

- then move to the key ideas (textbooks)

*In other words, cover the main ideas in the available work – offer the kind of summary that would be found in the textbooks in the subject area.*

- summarize and contrast

*these key ideas*

- narrow down to specific ideas

*What is most relevant to your research? Here you will need to go beyond the textbook coverage, and use the research texts (monographs, edited books, journal articles etc.) to provide the necessary detail and complexity.*

- highlight areas where your research will contribute

*That is, identify the weaknesses and gaps in the existing literature which your research will address empirically, or the new ways in which you will combine or evaluate literature/s.*

- offer summary so as provide a bridge to methodology and data analysis

*This is 'tailing' – summarize the key points from the literature review and then suggest that these issues will form the basis for your own data gathering, as discussed in the methodology and data analysis chapters which follow.*

And remember that: “you would also expect to return to the literature during the discussion and conclusion sections of your project report. You will want to present the significance of your empirical findings in the light of other people’s work and you will want to draw on other authors in arguing for the recommendations which you wish to make in the light of your findings.” (Jankowicz, 2005: 162)

*As suggested in the introduction and earlier notes on this topic, you need to refer back to the literature review in your data analysis, so as to compare your work to other research as well as suggesting how the data answer your research questions. Do they confirm, amend or differ from the findings of other researchers?*

For example, Halme (2000) on ‘environmental learning’ in organizations

*Halme conducted research at two Finnish firms – a packaging manufacturer and a paper maker. She starts from the premise that the natural environment (eg, resources like oil, gas, wood and water) has traditionally not been taken into account when strategic decisions have been made, because senior managers have tended to assume that this environment is simply there to be exploited and that their primary focus should be on making profit. But this mindset is gradually changing, so Halme is interested in how senior managers might start to include environmental values as a matter of course in their decision making. We use this example here because Halme is very careful to return to her earlier review of the relevant literature in her conclusions. She summarizes this literature as arguing that “corporations must learn new ecocentric paradigms before they can be expected to produce environmentally sound performance” (Halme, 2000: 1087). Her data on the other hand indicate that “cognitive-level environmental change does not inevitably precede behaviour change” (Halme, 2000: 1087). So her Finnish managers learnt to be ‘environmentally friendly’ in their decisions by starting to take environmentally friendly decisions – ie, they **learnt by doing**, as opposed to learning first and then doing. Halme’s findings therefore **differ from** the orthodox wisdom in this area of management literature.*

“What is required [from a literature review] is an insightful evaluation of what is known which leads naturally to a clarification of the gaps in the field and the way

in which the proposed research is intended to fill them.” (Gill and Johnson, 2002: 26)

*As ULMC assessors, we therefore want to see three main things in your literature review. First we are looking for evidence of **reading**: have you accessed and referred to the key texts, theories, concepts, models and findings? is your review reasonably comprehensive? Second, have you **understood** what you have read? The aforementioned comparative, thematic approach is the key here, as is writing in your own words! Third, you need to **evaluate** the literature - how well do the various authors make their cases? what have they overlooked? what problematic assumptions do they make? do they use a narrow range of methods? is their evidence convincing? is the research located amongst a specific group of people or in a specific context? and how does all of this relate to YOUR work? (Evaluation thus leads into establishing your contribution as also discussed above).*

**NB** you will also need to read the relevant literature to plan and write up your methodology

*and make reference to this literature in the requisite places in your dissertation – especially the methodology chapter, as also suggested in the introduction to these notes.*

#### **Topic 4: Formulating research questions**

Research questions indicate gaps or uncertainties in our knowledge about a specific area – they aim to “[find] out something you don’t know already” (MBA Project Guidelines for the Dissertation, page 3)

*Remember that “[r]esearch may be characterized as methodical investigations into a subject or problem. To “research” is to seek answers that involve understanding and explanation ... ” (Williams and May, 1996: 7) from the Topic 1 notes. Your research topic is therefore not the same thing as your research questions. For example, if you are interested in researching work-life balance and gender in the UK (the **topic**), your research **questions**, which indicate things that you want to find out about this topic, might be as follows:*

*- To what extent is work-life balance an important issue for British men as compared to British women?;*

*- Do British men deal with work-life balance differently from British women?;*  
*and*

*- Do British men see work-life balance as a source of stress?*

Some things to think about when formulating a research question:

- **make sure the topic and question(s) are of personal interest ...**

*“Please remember to choose a topic that you are happy to sustain an interest in over the whole period of the project - and possibly beyond.” (MBA Project Guidelines for the Dissertation, page 4)*

*This is crucial, which is why we’ve used bold text to emphasize it. We also drew your attention to this in the notes for Topic 1. So your topic might come from your own (work/ non-work) experience – eg, Fantasia wrote about worker solidarity in the US as a result of working at a small iron foundry when a wildcat strike occurred (Robson, 2002: 49). One of the authors of these*

notes studied the body in organizations for an extended period of time because she is extremely body consciousness herself. Or perhaps you have been particularly attracted to an issue covered in one of your MBA (/ MSc) modules, or there is a current news story in your country to do with an aspect of management which has caught your eye. Alternatively, you may wish to do something which is influenced by your beliefs – eg, a study of environmental management if you are a member of Greenpeace.

- **... but avoid pre-judgement of your findings or allowing preference for method or analytical approach to influence your choice**

Although as we have said above it is crucial that you choose a topic that interests you, so you can keep your interest and motivation going, it is also very important that you do not pre-judge your findings, or allow an interest or expertise in a particular method or approach to analysing data to influence the research question that you select. First you need to keep an open mind about what the answer to your research questions might be, because otherwise your preconceptions will mean that you are likely to ignore important data or to misinterpret the data that you do gather. Second, research methods and data analysis techniques should be chosen to fit the research topic, not the other way around.

- look at the subject-specific literature for suggestions for future research

...

Relevant themes or directions may be suggested in the literature, as already suggested in the notes for Topic 3.

- ... and for gaps and weaknesses

Again we have mentioned the idea of making a contribution in the notes for Topics 1 and 3: scanning the subject-specific literature allows you to see where you might be able to add something new by looking at something that hasn't been studied before, by using an unusual method, by gathering data from a different kind of sample or by bringing together and/ or evaluating literature in a novel way.

- your research question needs to be of contemporary relevance

We have also said this before, in the notes for Topics 1 and 3, but it's worth reiterating that you need to focus on something which contemporary academics and managers will be interested in. And of course an up to date knowledge of the relevant literature helps here too.

- try to choose a question that has real world value (especially to the organization/s being researched)

Also covered in the notes on Topic 1. 'Real world value' is Robson's (2002: 56) term – he adapts it from Campbell et al.'s work on what makes successful research. Campbell et al. refer to successful research having relevance or usefulness to managers, to its potential to address specific organizational problems or improve organizational processes or procedures. Not only does this mean the research has a use beyond adding to academic knowledge but it also gives something back to the organization where you are doing the research, or perhaps which is sponsoring you. It might also make access

easier if you can promise some kind of report which will make specific recommendations for organizational improvements (more on this in the notes on Topic 6). Indeed we would expect that your MBA (/ MSc Marketing/ MSc Finance) dissertation would focus on an issue of strategic significance – ie, that has some bearing on the achievement of organizational goals. BUT do remember that you are not only acting as a consultant or aiming to produce a management report and that the dissertation must be of academic significance and written according to academic protocol, as again we established in the notes for Topic 1.

- one way to come up with a research question is by brainstorming (see Gill and Johnson, 2002: 19 for a useful example)

*The example they give is around the wide topic of managerial stress. You can brainstorm with others or alone. The process is to write down any topics or questions as they come to mind, however silly they may seem, under a broad heading like organizational culture, Total Quality Management etc.. Only when you have run out of ideas should you start to evaluate them in terms of how effective a research focus they are likely to provide.*

- focus and feasibility are also really important

*Students often make the mistake of choosing research questions which are too broad. This means that you will not have the time or the necessary resources in terms of money or equipment to actually find out the answers to these questions. You need to keep your questions as narrow as possible – think about the range of literature you will have to consult and the variety of data you will need to collect - do you have time? do you have the necessary money and equipment? are the literature and data you need likely to be available to you? Gill and Johnson (2002: 16) give the example of a dissertation seeking to compare the role of Human Resource departments in the UK and the US. But, say you were a UK-based student, how would you get the US data? If you can't use questionnaires, you don't have the money to get to the US to do interviews and the data isn't available in secondary form, then how would you do this project? Another example might be suggesting that you want to evaluate HRM in a particular organization or compare two organizations in terms of their approach to HRM. But HRM is a huge topic, so it would be much more sensible to focus on one of its aspects, such as recruitment or employee involvement or performance management. Similarly, some students have said in the past that they want to look at, say, TQM in 'the Chinese economy' or 'the Greek economy'. However, this again is much too broad – we would suggest choosing a particular sector like banking or hotels or car manufacturing. **Nonetheless**, you need to work towards a balance here – focus and feasibility are crucial, but as Campbell et al. (cited in Robson, 2002: 56) also point out, the cheapest, quickest and easiest research isn't always the best research!*

... and an example: "The comparative performance of the British and German car industries"

*This might look like a sensible research question, but it needs refining and focusing – as it stands it would be difficult to research sensibly and systematically. For example, what is meant by performance here? Global market share? Return on investment? Customer satisfaction? Or even*

*environmental friendliness? Also, what time period is indicated? Would the focus just be on the period since East and West Germany unified? And how is 'British' or 'German' defined? Nissan, for example, has some of its operations in Sunderland in the North of England, but it is a Japanese-owned car manufacturer.*

... plus a suggestion for a useful exercise (Saunders et al., 2003: 452-458) *This appendix gives many examples of research project titles "to stimulate possible research ideas". Saunders et al. also note that "You should not take the inclusion of a title as an indication of the quality of the title or any associated research project" (page 452). So have a look at these titles and decide whether not they also represent adequate research **questions** – could you take these and go about researching them as they stand? If not, what would you need to do to make them 'researchable'?*

- also think about choosing something that is relevant to the development of your management skills and knowledge

*We already know from the notes on Topic 1 that one of the reasons why we ask you to do a dissertation is to further your knowledge and skills so that you can take these with you into your management career. So choosing a topic that will be especially relevant to you **personally** in this regard is a good idea. For example, a student at a university where one of us used to work chose to research the extent of and reasons for tax evasion in her country of origin as her dissertation topic because she wanted to get a job in the relevant Tax Inspectorate when she graduated.*

- and your question should also have 'symmetry of potential outcomes'  
*What this means in simple terms is that you need to make sure that your findings will be interesting whatever the outcomes of your research. In other words, you need to choose a question(/s) that will allow for 'symmetry of potential outcomes'. For example, say your key research question was 'Does the increasing use of e-mail represent a stress factor in the Ghanaian banking sector?'. If your findings suggested that the increasing use of e-mail was not experienced as stressful by Ghanaian bank workers, then this would not be particularly interesting – this question therefore does not have symmetry of potential outcomes. But by rephrasing the question as 'Does the increasing use of e-mail represent a stress factor, a benefit or both in the Ghanaian banking sector?', then whatever the findings showed would be interesting.*

- sensitivity is a possible problem: "Access to companies can be obstructed by managers if they see a piece of research being harmful to their, or their company's, interests ..." (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002: 4)  
*We will talk more about getting access to organizations in the notes for Topic 6, but this might represent a real challenge if you choose a research question that seems to be sensitive. For example, the question of the effectiveness of drug testing at work could be seen as very sensitive on a personal, individual basis because it relates to confidential medical information and also to employees' private, leisure time behaviour. On the other hand, a project could be regarded as commercially sensitive – eg, something which focused on branding, unique selling points and/ or competitive strategies. There are ethical issues here too*

*relating to not invading respondents' privacy or putting them under any duress. Again, more on this in the notes on Topic 5, but bear in mind Gill and Johnson's (2002: 16) citation of a researcher who told them that he had a lot of difficulty getting access to managers to talk to them about their stress levels, and he felt this was because they were so stressed!*

- as are your capabilities

*Doing a dissertation is intended to develop your skills and abilities in a range of different ways, as discussed in the notes for Topic 1. However, it's still unwise to choose something which is a long way away from your 'comfort zone' – eg, don't choose a research question which would require a lot of quantitative, statistical work if you are not very numerate.*

Research questions are often iterative

*In other words your specific research question/(s) and the approach that you choose to answer it will probably alter as your dissertation proceeds – for example, personnel at the relevant organization might change, requiring access re-negotiation, or you could discover new angles or concepts on the issues as you do more reading.*

**BUT** "what is known about the topic, what is seen as problematic, the approaches that have been taken, etc. It helps to get a good feel for this. However, it is all too easy to be imprisoned by what others have done into a particular way of looking at, and of investigating, the topic. Beware." (Robson, 2002: 54)

*“it is not uncommon for researchers to become bogged down in reading the literature so that it not only becomes a means of avoiding the tough process of writing but also often seems to become unhelpful in advancing original ideas, as the student becomes submerged in those of other people and thereby loses their own power and authority.” (Gill and Johnson, 2002: 25)*  
*Beware! Although reading the subject-specific literature is a good place to start in identifying a research question, don't be overly influenced by what others have done and how they have done it. Don't choose a topic or a method or a sample or a data analysis approach just because it is the one that seems to appear most frequently in the literature. Remember that we like to see students making an effort to do something **original**, to offer some sort of **contribution**.*

And remember that research is more than just 'intelligence gathering': "You should be seeking to explain [or explore] phenomena, to analyse relationships, to compare what is going on in different research settings, to predict outcomes and to generalise ... " (Saunders *et al.*, 2003: 28)

*As established in the notes for Topic 1, academic research should aim not only to ask **what** is happening, but also **why**: it should aim to explain or explore as well as describing. For example, asking how much US organizations spend on training per employee as compared to German organizations is not really academic research: it's more journalistic fact-finding. A piece of academic research would excavate the reasons for any similarities or differences in this regard, and suggest their significance.*

A clearly defined research question(/s) is also more likely to generate successful research

*because your pathway through the research process will then be easier to identify – your research question should help you to decide what you need to read and what kind of data you need to gather, where this will happen, when it will happen and how it will happen.*

**Finally remember that "[a]ll enquiry involves drudgery and frustration and you need to have a strong interest in the topic to keep you going through the bad times." (Robson, 2002: 49)**

*We've put this in bold, italic, 16 point typeface because it is so crucial – if you start off not being interested in your topic then this is a sure-fire way to produce a lacklustre, unsatisfactory dissertation!*

#### **Summary of topics 3 and 4**

1. Literature reviews are important in the MBA(/ MSc Marketing/ MSc Finance) dissertation process for a variety of reasons
2. There are a variety of different sources for subject-specific literature
3. Your literature search will typically start wide and become more narrow as it proceeds
4. When taking notes from the literature, keep your main purpose in mind
5. A literature review needs to be appropriately structured and to demonstrate reading, understanding and evaluation

*Also remember that you should return to the literature you have reviewed in your data analysis to suggest how your findings relate to the existing body of knowledge in this regard, as well as how they answer your research question(/s).*

6. Research questions represent gaps in our knowledge
7. The most important (but not the only) issue here is **your interest** in the topic/question(/s)

Now please continue by reading the notes for Topic 5.

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#### **References**

The following are the sources which were used to compile these notes. Chapters or excerpts are specified to suggest material which should be especially relevant to issues covered in the notes.

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