

## Guidance on Research Methods for Unit 7 Advanced Practitioner Project Stage 3

Assessment year: 2024/2025

### 1.0 Introduction

This short guide sets out some advice on where to find information on research methods and the issues you will need to take account of, if your project consists of gathering primary data. It is not a definitive guide because the information you need will depend on what type of primary data you require to answer your aim and objectives. It instead points you in the direction of resources that you can use to help you identify the right method, use that method appropriately and justify your choices when writing up your project.

Many of these resources are text books; however, you would only need to use one of these and the list is not definitive. If you have studied research methods in the past and would prefer to use an appropriate alternative text, that is fine.

Other resources are open access. They include blogs, websites and some short videos that you may find helpful. Again, there is a lot of information out there, so this guide gives you some links to start with as an introduction to research methods.

### 2.0 Text books

Some of the most popular textbooks (for example, Saunders et al 2018 and Bryman and Bell 2018) regularly produce new editions; however, and older second-hand editions will suffice. Recent changes in research methods have been around the use of digital methods but the key principles remain the same and will be fine to use. Remember, you will need to use at least one textbook, but one should be enough.

Below we have given suggestions of texts that include sections on both qualitative and quantitative research and are widely used in universities:

1. BRYMAN, A. 2016. *Social Research Methods* 5th Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press
2. BRYMAN A. AND BELL E., 2018. *Business Research Methods*. 5th Edition. Oxford University Press
3. SARANTAKOS, S., 2013. *Social research*. 4th edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan
4. SAUNDERS, M., LEWIS, P. and THORNHILL, A. 2018. *Research Methods for Business Students*. 8<sup>th</sup> Edition. Essex: Pearson Education

### 3.0 Quantitative or Qualitative Methodology

If you are going to be gathering primary data, then the first choice many students will face will be whether to use quantitative or qualitative methods. You may also choose to do a mixed methods project where you use a combination of both.

**(Note:** if you choose to do both, that this can be challenging in terms of timescale.)

The aims and objectives of your research project will dictate what type of research method will be appropriate and you will need to justify your decision in your research methodology chapter.

Qualitative and quantitative research have their own strengths and weaknesses and these issues are explored in all of the key texts suggested on page 1. You should consult one of these texts to help you identify which approach is best for your research. When writing up your project you must reference this text when justifying your choice.

#### *Example:*

Quantitative research is associated with the collection of numerical data. If your project aims to find out how many trading standards services in the UK have adopted trader approval schemes, you may consider what those schemes cover, the trader uptake and the impact on the level of complaints received by those local authorities. To investigate this, you would use a quantitative research strategy.

In contrast, if the aim of your project is to obtain an in-depth understanding of the challenges of implementing a particular trader approval schemes operated by trading standards in Wales, you could instead use a qualitative research design.

### 3.1 Useful resources on whether to use qualitative or quantitative research design

We recommend you use a text book or a journal article to justify your choice in your proposal and your final project report, but watching some of these videos can be a good way to start exploring the topic.

Some of the videos are more colloquial in tone and are good introductions to the reading. The University of Southampton videos are more 'old school' but are still useful.

The University of Southampton hosts the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM). Many of their materials are open access, which you can access via the NCRM website (<https://www.ncrm.ac.uk/>). They tend to provide more detail than is needed but are useful if you are interested in finding out more about a specific topic.

This short video from Chris Flipp is a good introduction to the relative strengths of qualitative and quantitative methods:

- Chris Flipp, 'Qualitative vs. quantitative' - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2X-QSU6-hPU>

There are a number of Chris Flipp videos on research methods available that provide clear information and we have recommended some more later in this document.

This video from the University of Southampton provides information on different research designs:

- University of Southampton, 'Thinking about research design' - <https://youtu.be/0HlhFcr7htM>

## 4.0 Quantitative methods

If you are using quantitative methods, the primary research instrument used will be a survey (questionnaires).

Key questions for you to consider and justify will be:

- what type of questions to use - for example, do you use Likert questions, yes / no questions, open ended questions or a combination?
- ensure that your survey includes a 'participant information sheet', and some means of indicating that the person completing the survey consents to taking part and that they know that they do not have to complete all the questions. An example is found in 'Appendix 1'
- how you will distribute your survey (online, face to face, email, post). There are an increasing number of ways of administering surveys, including web-based platforms and mobile devices. Some of your employers may have access to survey design tools such as Survey Monkey, which you may wish to use. Survey Monkey is also available free, but the free version only allows you to have a maximum of 10 questions, which is unlikely to be enough. You can also create a questionnaire using Google Forms. Information on this is available via the following link: <https://support.google.com/a/users/answer/9302965>.
- sample size and selection; this will vary according to your topic. For example, if you are surveying the views of consumers, a minimum sample size of 100 is likely to be appropriate. In other projects, you may survey the whole population. For example, if you were researching the views of local authorities in Scotland, it would be appropriate to survey the whole population since there are only 32 local authorities
- response rate and what you will do if your response rate is very low
- how you will analyse your results, including what type of statistical analysis may be appropriate. There are a range of more advanced statistical tests that can be used to analyse your findings and the text books on this subject cover this; however, it is envisaged that many of you will use descriptive statistics only
- the limitations of your chosen method
- any ethical issues associated with your choice

### 4.1 Useful resources on quantitative methods.

In addition to the text book of your choice, you may find the following videos useful:

- Chris Flipp, 'Quantitative sampling' - <https://youtu.be/WKUAop1Pre0>

Do not underestimate how long it will take you to design a good survey and make sure you include a pilot. There are lots of useful hints and tips in the below videos.

- Claud Ebster, 'How to conduct an online survey' - [https://youtu.be/uTIWI76\\_klI](https://youtu.be/uTIWI76_klI)
- University of Southampton, 'What is a questionnaire' - [https://youtu.be/CfEga-dr\\_Ww](https://youtu.be/CfEga-dr_Ww)
- Elon University, '7 tips for good survey design' - [https://youtu.be/lq\\_fhTuY1hw](https://youtu.be/lq_fhTuY1hw)

Keep an eye out for good examples of survey design next time you are asked to complete a questionnaire.

The video below is on the importance of considering how someone who completes a survey will interpret a question:

- NCRMUK, 'Asking survey questions: identifying problems' - <https://youtu.be/nC-PCCKXVYY>

Videos on analysing quantitative data

- University of Southampton, 'Analysing questionnaires' - <https://youtu.be/c5CIF8RIGb4>
- NUS, '9 quantitative data analysis' - <https://youtu.be/81jmL-jUdcA>

## Qualitative research projects

If you are using qualitative methods, the typical research instruments that you are likely to consider are interviews and focus groups.

Other qualitative methods you may consider using include qualitative content analysis and observations (increasingly referred to as ethnography in textbooks) or the use of diaries.

Additional ethical issues may arise if you use these methods, particularly if you are thinking about ethnography.

Which of these methods is the most appropriate, will again, depend on your aims and objective and you will need to justify your choice for preferring one over the other.

When using qualitative research methods you will also need to:

- justify your sample size. The number of interviews tends to be a lot smaller than the sample size for questionnaires and should be justified by reference to literature. 8-10 interviews are fairly typical in undergraduate projects. The number of focus groups their size also need to be justified
- explain your sampling criteria and how you recruited your sample
- whether or not you're using interviews, focus groups or some other qualitative method, and if so, why?
- if you're using interviews, explain what type of interview you are doing - for example, whether it is face to face, telephone, online and whether it is semi-structured or unstructured. A list of your questions should be included as an appendix in your final project report
- if you're using focus groups, explain why and how you intend to undertake them. Online discussion forums may be used as an alternative to traditional face to face focus groups. These can be synchronous and/or asynchronous. A list of your questions should be included as an appendix in your final project report
- provide a participant information sheet and ask participants to sign a consent form. These must be included in your proposal
- indicate whether or not you're recording the interview or focus groups and how it is being transcribed
- explain what type of analysis you will be doing of your qualitative data - for example, thematic analysis
- identify any ethical issues that arise - for example, the project handbook says it is unlikely to be appropriate to interview children or vulnerable witnesses

## Resources on qualitative research

There will be a section on each of these topics in your text book of choice but additional useful online resources include the following:

### Qualitative sampling

This Chris Flipp video a good introduction to this topic:

- Chris Flipp, 'Qualitative sampling' - <https://youtu.be/-Dn4u9DPmDs>

### How many interviews?

This is a much-debated subject by qualitative researchers. If the text book you are using does not give clear guidance then you may find this open access journal article helps you think about what would be an appropriate sample size. The table on page 3 compares interview sample sizes.

1. SIM, J., SAUNDERS, B., WATERFIELD, J., and KINGSTON T., 2018. SIM, J., SAUNDERS, B., WATERFIELD, J., and KINGSTON T., 2018. Can sample size in qualitative research be determined a priori? *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324042278\\_Can\\_sample\\_size\\_in\\_qualitative\\_research\\_be\\_determined\\_a\\_priori](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324042278_Can_sample_size_in_qualitative_research_be_determined_a_priori)

### Practical guidance on undertaking interviews

If you are using interviews then the research instrument is you. Below you can find a couple of very helpful blog posts by Mary Kennedy on this topic:

- 'A guide to interview guides' - <https://msu.edu/user/mkennedy/digitaladvisor/Research/interviewing.htm>
- 'Interview probes' - <https://msu.edu/user/mkennedy/digitaladvisor/Research/interviewprobes.htm>

### Analysis of qualitative data

- University of Southampton, 'Analysing your interviews' - <https://youtu.be/59GsjhPolPs>

Thematic analysis is commonly used in qualitative research. Your textbook of choice should set out how you can approach it. This open access journal article sets out a straightforward six step approach to thematic analysis which you could use instead:

- BRAUN V. and CLARKE V. 2006 Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. 3(2) *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 77-101  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235356393\\_Using\\_Thematic\\_Analysis\\_in\\_Psychology](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235356393_Using_Thematic_Analysis_in_Psychology)

### Content analysis

Note that content analysis can be quantitative or qualitative. There is potential for this to overlap with a practical enforcement project where you may be using your statutory powers to undertake a form of content analysis - for example, examination of websites. Content analysis here, therefore, is referring to research projects where you are not using any statutory powers. This Chris Flipp video introduces this area:

- Chris Flipp, 'Content analysis' - [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0\\_d1QsR04](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0_d1QsR04)

## Diary methods and ethnography

We have included this open access source on diary methods as this might be something that could work in a local authority context, if your colleagues were willing to complete them:

- BYTHEWAY B. 2012. The Use of Diaries in Qualitative Longitudinal Research. Timescapes Methods Guides Series Guide No. 7. ISSN 2049-9248 (Online) Available from <http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/assets/files/methods-guides/timescapes-bytheway-use-of-diaries.pdf>

Ethnography (observation) could make a good method if your colleagues' consent. There are a couple of videos below you can watch to get an idea of what it could involve:

- 'Ethnography or observational research' - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tHgNXzS2EY>

This Chris Flipp video makes clear that in his view ethnography is more than just observation, although observation is a part of it:

- Chris Flipp, 'Ethnography' - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6llzz3DIEWQ>

There is academic research for example looking at how many regulators carry out their day to day enforcement duties, including Cranston's academic study from the 1970s on trading standards officers. More recently Gilad (2008) carried out an observation study of complaint handlers at the Financial Ombudsman Service. It is increasingly hard for academics to gain access to workplaces to carry out similar observations, so if you are an experienced researcher / officer, you could do a research project in this area if your colleagues consented.

## 5.0 Ethical issues

Whichever method you use when collecting primary data, you must consider ethical issues and the use and storage of the data collected. The project handbook sets out important guidance on this in section 2.5, which reminds you of the need to obtain informed consent. Research that includes children or vulnerable people should be avoided.

As a guiding principle, you should ensure that your research does no harm. Is your topic therefore on something that is likely to cause upset or relate to a sensitive subject?

### 5.1 Additional resources

You may find it useful to reflect on this guidance from the Economic and Social Research Council, which sets out six key principles for ethical research: (<https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics/our-core-principles/>)

- research should aim to maximise benefit for individuals and society and minimise risk and harm
- the rights and dignity of individuals and groups should be respected
- wherever possible, participation should be voluntary and appropriately informed
- research should be conducted with integrity and transparency
- lines of responsibility and accountability should be clearly defined
- independence of research should be maintained and where conflicts of interest cannot be avoided, they should be made explicit

The ESRC provide some straightforward FAQs on why research ethics is important:

- <https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics/frequently-raised-questions/>

## **6.0 Final comments**

Remember the project handbook also contains lots of advice on how to decide upon your aim and objectives, how to approach research methods, what information you need to provide when submitting your research proposal and what your methodology chapter must contain. It also includes the marking criteria. Make sure you read this guidance in conjunction with the project handbook.

There are also many good resources out there and this handbook is not a definitive guide. If you do identify something that you found particularly useful, then inform the Education Team and we can add it to future versions of this handbook.



## APPENDIX 1: Participant Information sheets

You must include a copy of any participant information sheet as part of your proposal. Most universities and other research institutions provide pro formas for creating participant information sheets that you can have a look at.

If you are using a survey, then the information below should form the front page of your survey. For qualitative research, participants should be given or provided electronically with an information sheet containing the following information.

You must ensure that any information sheet includes the following areas:

### Heading

The information sheet / form should include your employers heading / logo.

### Title of the research project

### Invitation paragraph

Explain that the prospective participant is being asked to take part in a research project.

*For example, you could say:*

My name is Sam Student and I am a XXXXXXXX working for XXXXX. I am currently studying for XXXXXX and as part of this qualification must complete a research project. The title of my project is, xxxxxxxxxx

### Purpose of the research

The background, aim, and duration of the project should be given here. Remember to be brief and avoid overly complicated language.

### Why have I been chosen?

You should explain how the participant was chosen and say how many other participants will be recruited.

*Example:*

"I am looking for volunteers over the age of 18 to participate in the project. There are no criteria (e.g. gender, age, or health) for being included or excluded - everyone is welcome to take part. *[If there are inclusion / exclusion criteria, then these should be stated.]*"

### What do I have to do?

You should explain:

- how long the participant will be involved in the research, how long the research will last (if this is different)
- if they are being asked to participate more than once, how often will they need to participate and for how long each time (you should explain if travel expenses are available)
- what exactly will happen (for example, survey consisting of x questions, face to face / telephone / online interviews / focus group)
- make clear that taking part in the research is entirely voluntary and that refusal to agree to participate will involve no penalty and the participant may discontinue participation at any time



*Examples:*

Interviews

"If you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to take part in a face to face interview with the researcher at a venue of your choice. The interview will be recorded and subsequently transcribed. The researcher is not aware of any risks associated with the interviews. The interview should take no longer than 45 minutes. Your agreement to take part is voluntary. You are also free to withdraw at any time and you do not have to give a reason."

Online survey

This survey consists of 24 mainly tick-box questions and takes around 10 minutes to complete, depending on how much you choose to comment. You are free to withdraw from the survey at any point. If you need to pause filling in the survey, you can return to it by clicking 'Finish Later' and instructing this platform to email you a URL to resume at your convenience.

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

- any reasonably foreseeable disadvantages, and risks need to be stated

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

- any benefits to the participants that can reasonably be expected should be stated. If you are offering any rewards or recompense, please describe
- if there are no direct advantages or rewards, this should be clearly stated (you could add a few details about the useful contributions that the research will bring)

*Example:*

"[If applicable: Since your participation will involve you travelling to XXXXX, you will be reimbursed for out-of-pocket expenses.]"

"Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will ..."

**What will happen to the results of the research project?**

- you should explain that all personal information collected about them will be kept strictly confidential and explain how information will be kept confidential
- you should explain that the data will be anonymised and that they will not be identified in any report or publication
- you need to obtain the participants' permission to record their activities on audio or video media. You must ensure that there is a clear understanding as to how these recorded media will be used and how it will be stored in line with data protection requirements
- where, due to the nature of the research, it may not be possible to safeguard the confidentiality of the data, then the reasons for this should be stated here and their explicit consent to this obtained
- you should be able to tell the participants what will happen to the results of the research (that is, if the results are likely to be published and whether they can obtain a copy of the published results)
- depending on the nature of your proposed project, you may also need to include a statement indicating that the data collected during the course of the project might be used for additional or subsequent research (if this is the case then this should be explicit on the participant consent form)

*Example:*

All data will be anonymised as much as possible, but you may be identifiable from tape recordings of your voice / or xxxxxxxxxx. Your name will be replaced with a participant number, and it will not be possible for you to be identified in any reporting of the data gathered. The results may be published in a journal or presented at a conference / or xxxxxxxxxx.

### **Data protection issues**

You must ensure that all personal information is treated in accordance with the terms of the UK Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

*Example:*

Any data you provide in the survey will be handled in accordance with the terms of the UK Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). For the duration of this project the data will be stored on a password-protected computer at XXXXXXXX for the purpose of analysis for my research project. This period will be approximately 9 months; once analysis has been completed the raw data including any of your details will be deleted.

### **Who is organising/ funding the research?**

You should state the organisation or company that is sponsoring or funding the research.

### **Contact for further information**

You should give the participant a contact point for further information. This can be your name, address and telephone number.

### **Who do I contact if I have concerns about this study or I wish to complain?**

This should be the contact details of your line manager.

### **Thank you**

Remember to thank the individual for taking the time to read the information sheet.

*Example:*

“THANK YOU FOR CONSIDERING PARTICIPATING IN THIS PROJECT”

## Appendix 2

### Informed consent form example: quantitative research projects

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this survey.

Please read the following statements and tick the boxes to agree.

The information provided by you in this questionnaire will be used for research purposes. It will not be used in any manner which would allow identification of your individual responses.

- I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason
- I agree to take part in the above study

### Informed consent form example: qualitative research projects

The consent form should include your employers heading and the following information:

Full title of project

- I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason
- I agree to take part in the above study

#### Include the following statements, if appropriate:

- I agree to the interview being audio recorded
- I agree to the interview being video recorded
- I agree to the use of anonymised quotations in publications

Signed and dated by participant and researcher -----

Name, position and contact address of researcher -----