1
An Introduction to Business Research

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- know what research and business research are, and why they are important in both business and academia;
- understand the key concepts of research;
- be aware of the relationship between the key concepts of research as illustrated in the 'Honeycomb of Research Methodology';
- understand the rationale for using multi-strategy research;
- appreciate how business research is linked to the organization;
- be aware of the research skills required to undertake research;
- know the stages in the research process;
- understand the differences between academic and organizational research; and
- know the role played by research project supervisors and the kind of support they provide.

Introduction

Research is one of those words that you are likely to come across on an almost daily basis. You may have read in the newspaper that the latest market research study links passive smoking to an increased likelihood of lung cancer. Or perhaps a news headline makes reference to a groundbreaking piece of medical research into a possible cure for HIV/AIDS. To be sure, illustrations of various types of research are regularly publicized in the media. However, the information provided often only relates to research findings. What exactly is research? What distinguishes business research from other types of research? This chapter aims to answer these questions and sets out to provide a clear introduction to business research.

This chapter starts by clearly defining and explaining research, and more importantly business research. In order to emphasize the message that an understanding

of research, methodology and methods is an essential requirement to your project, we spend a reasonable amount of time looking at these particular terms. Following this, readers are first introduced to *The Honeycomb of Research Methodology*. This is a new feature of the second edition. One of the aims of the honeycomb is to show the six main elements that combine to make up the centre segment – research methodology. We begin by examining the first three of these elements, also referred to as the 'key concepts of research', and consider the relationship between all three concepts. The other elements of the honeycomb are addressed later in the book. Next, we look at how business research is linked to the organization and explore the necessary research skills required to be an effective researcher. This is followed by an overview of the likely steps that you will go through when conducting your research. Although the majority of this book is aimed at business students, the next part of this introductory chapter provides an insight into the differences between academic and organizational research. Mature students and those of you who have worked within a business setting may already be familiar with the nature of organizational research. However, it is important to understand the differences that exist, not least because it will impact on your approach towards your research project.

The last section looks at the role of the project supervisor. The importance of your project supervisor cannot be underestimated. Unfortunately, many students fail to use their supervisor to good effect. Therefore, I have included a section, 'The role of the supervisor', in Chapter 1 in order to illustrate the importance of the supervisor from the outset. Finally, the chapter concludes with a case study, 'You're the supervisor', and common questions and answers. These pedagogical features are a common theme within each chapter. They are designed to aid you during the research process by including actual student case examples, common student questions that I have come across in the context of project supervision, and finally what I call 'role reversal', where you are required to answer questions from the project supervisor's perspective.

The Meaning of Research

Although the title of this book makes reference to 'business research', I think it is worth having a review of what is actually meant by the term 'research'. The majority of students usually take some kind of research skills module as part of their study programme. For that reason, some of you may have an understanding of what is meant by research.

While research is important in both business and academia, there is no consensus in the literature on how it should be defined. The main reason for this is that different people can interpret research differently. However, from the many definitions there appears to be conformity that:

- research is a process of enquiry and investigation;
- it is systematic and methodical; and
- research increases knowledge.

Let us look at each of the above points in turn. First, a 'process of enquiry and investigation' suggests that research is all about having a predetermined set of questions, and then aiming to answer these questions through the gathering of information, and later analysis. Second, 'systematic and methodical' imply that your research must be well organized and go through a series of stages. Finally, 'research increases knowledge' is relatively self-explanatory. Your own knowledge about your chosen subject will certainly improve as a result of your research, but so too, hopefully, will that of your audience, and this may also include your project supervisor!

Research can be defined as a 'step-by-step process that involves the collecting, recording, analyzing and interpreting of information'. As researchers, we are interested in improving our knowledge and understanding of our chosen topic. To do this effectively, researchers must have a clear set of research questions. The importance of research questions cannot be stressed highly enough. The research questions are the main focus of any project, and can probably best be described as '*the glue that holds the project together*'.

Generally speaking, research is all about generating answers to questions – to advance knowledge. The nature of these questions depends on the topic of research. For example, a marketer might carry out research to investigate consumer perceptions about a certain brand. Or a medical researcher might want to explore the association between recovery times and different medical treatments. Although the research questions are tailored towards a particular topic, essentially the process that researchers go through usually involves a similar series of stages, and I shall address these later on in this chapter.

In addition to research, it is likely that you have come across *methods* and *methodology*. It is necessary to distinguish the difference between the two terms as students often use them interchangeably, although there is a distinct difference. *Methodology* can be defined as 'the approach and strategy used to conduct research'. In general, methodology is concerned with the overall approach to the research process. This includes everything from your theoretical application to the collection and analysis of your data. On the other hand, *methods* refer to the different ways by which data can be collected and analyzed.

Business Research

The purpose of business research is to gather information in order to aid business-related decision-making. *Business research* is defined as 'the systematic and objective process of collecting, recording, analyzing and interpreting data for aid in solving managerial problems'. These managerial problems can be linked to any business function, e.g. human resources, finance, marketing or research and development. Your research project can also be interpreted as business research in the sense that it will be related to business and management. In some cases, this may encompass more than one particular business discipline. For instance, a study might focus on the level of marketing knowledge among finance managers (marketing and finance). Some examples of areas of business and possible research issues are shown in Table 1.1.

TABLE 1.1 Examples of business research

Business aspect	Research issues
Consumer behaviour	Buying habits, brand preference, consumer attitudes
Human resources	Employee attitudes, staff retention, material incentives
Promotion	Media research, public relations studies, product recall through advertising
Product	Test markets, concept studies, performance studies
Finance	Forecasting, budgeting, efficiency of accounting software

Why Research is Important

We have already established that research is all about providing answers to questions and developing knowledge. These questions in themselves are significant, hence the need to conduct research. You are likely to have conducted your own research to address questions that are important to you. For example, if the international students among you wish to return home for Christmas, it is unlikely that you would buy a ticket from the first airline that you see advertised. Instead, you would probably do some research to find out if there exists a cheaper alternative carrier. This may involve exploring various airline websites, or asking friends and family. Quite simply, research is the key to decision-making. Without sufficient information, decision-making is likely to be more difficult.

Importance of research in business

In business, research is important in identifying opportunities and threats. Often, a company's success or failure is dependent on the actions undertaken as a result of conducting research. Although carrying out business research does not guarantee success, it is likely to increase the possibility that a new product, service, brand identity or even an event is successful. In some cases, the level of research conducted can be questionable, especially if public opinion is markedly different to that of an organization's viewpoint, as illustrated in the following case example.

RESEARCH IN ACTION

The London Olympics 2012 logo

The logo of the London 2012 Olympic Games was unveiled to the world in June 2007. At a cost of £400,000, it was hailed as 'dynamic' and 'vibrant' by organizers, while its 'graffiti style' was designed to appeal to the younger generation and work across a variety of media platforms.

Designed by leading brand consultants Wolff Olins, the logo took the best part of a year to produce and bears a resemblance to the year 2012. However, shortly after its launch, the design came up against widespread disapproval, with one Jewish person even ringing the BBC to complain that it was reminiscent of the infamous Nazi SS symbol.

Design guru Stephen Bayley condemned it as 'a puerile mess, an artistic flop and a commercial scandal'. An online petition to get the logo scrapped received thousands of signatures, while research conducted by Ipsos MORI, one of the UK's leading research companies, found a similarly negative response. For example, when questioned 'Do you approve or disapprove of the logo?' only 16% of respondents commented that they approved of the logo.

Although the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) stressed that the logo was paid for by private money, Mr Bayley voiced his astonishment that the emblem – available in blue, pink, green and orange – had cost £400,000. 'That's outrageous,' he said. 'There are 5,000 talented designers who could have done the job for £10,000.' (Carlin, 2007; Ipsos MORI, 2007)

In the case of the London Olympics 2012 logo, it can be questioned as to whether LOCOG carried out sufficient research prior to choosing the new logo. Later media coverage suggests that many people eventually warmed to the design, thus il lustrating that business research may only provide a snapshot of people's opinion, and that attitudes can change over time.

Why studying research methods is important

The London Olympics 2012 logo example highlights why research is important in a commercial setting. However, as mentioned in the introduction, it is also an important part of your course. Your research project is probably the culmination of three to four years of hard study. Yet, for those students who participate in a research skills module as part of their study programme, in some cases the module is perceived as not being essential, or even relevant. There are perhaps two reasons for this. First, it is often embedded within a course and sits alongside modules that are relevant to your chosen subject. For example, if you are studying a finance degree, you will probably take modules in auditing, management accounting, corporate finance, etc. Yet a first glance at your study timetable may raise the question 'What is this module?', or perhaps 'I'm here to study for a degree in finance, not research skills!' A common problem facing us poor lecturers is to try to get across the message that research skills *is* relevant to your course, provides a wide range of transferable skills and, above all, serves to provide the necessary skills in order to successfully complete your research project. Second, when taking a research skills module, students usually have a wide range of questions from the outset. In general, if these questions are addressed early, it can certainly help to alleviate some of the apprehension regarding the subject. Examples of some of the more common questions students tend to ask towards the beginning of learning research skills is shown in Table 1.2.

What are the long-term benefits of studying research skills?

As mentioned, in the short term, the primary importance of studying research skills is so that you are aware of what is required in order to satisfactorily complete your

TABLE 1.2 Your research questions answered

Question	Answer
What is research?	Research can be defined as a 'step-by-step process that involves the collecting, recording, analyzing and interpreting of information'.
Why do I need to learn about business research?	An essential part of most business-related study programmes is the research project. Learning about business research helps you to successfully complete your project as well as provide transferable skills that can be used in a wide variety of business and management positions.
How do I conduct research?	This book fully explains everything you need to know about how to conduct research. By the end of the book you should be in a position to answer this question!
Where do I conduct research?	This might seem obvious. However, international students may decide to conduct research in their own country, particularly if focusing on cross-cultural research, while those students who work part-time may conduct some aspects of their research in the workplace.
When do I conduct research?	In general, undertaking your research project commences towards the end of your final year of study. However, check with your university or college.

research project. However, the skills learned through studying research skills can also have long-term benefits, such as helping you to become a better reader of the research of others. This is an important skill for anyone going into business. For instance, at some point in your career you will probably be required to read and interpret a business report. This could be on any subject. If you have learned about research skills and research in general, then you are far more likely to be capable of understanding the study, not to mention interpreting the results and drawing your own conclusions.

Having experience of carrying out research is also an important requirement if you wish to continue with your education. Like undergraduate degrees, master's programmes usually require the submission of a major research project. These tend to be based on a larger number of words (typically 20,000–25,000). Yet much of what you learn through studying research skills can still be fully applied.

Key Concepts of Research

Having established the nature of research – in particular business research and why research is important – this next section takes a more theoretical look at research. Under the broad heading of 'key concepts of research', we shall look at research philosophies, research approaches and research strategies. By the end of this section you should understand each of these concepts, how they relate to your research project and the relationship between them.

The Honeycomb of Research Methodology

In order to understand the key concepts of research and how they fit into your methodology, we now consider the *Honeycomb of Research Methodology* (see Figure 1.1). In this honeycomb, the three highlighted elements or key concepts of research are joined with three other elements to make up research methodology. Put another way, in the honeycomb, the six main elements – namely: (1) research philosophy; (2) research approach; (3) research strategy; (4) research design; (5) data collection and (6) data analysis techniques – come together to form research methodology. This structure is characteristic of the main headings you will find in a methodology chapter in a business research project. The purpose of the numbered segments is to help you to see at which stage each element falls within the chapter.

Earlier in the chapter we looked at methodology, noting that there is a distinction between methodology and methods. At this point, it is also worth stressing that there are many different interpretations of 'research methodology'. Once again, my view is that methodology is 'the approach and strategy used to conduct research'. Several authors share a similar view. For example, Somekh and Lewin (2005: 346) defined methodology as both 'the collection of methods or rules by which a particular piece of research is undertaken' and the 'principles, theories and values that underpin a particular approach to research'. By way of example, let us say you wanted to construct your own house. Your methodology would not only include your proposed plan, but also consideration would be made as to the type of materials, timeframe, the approach to building the house, your views on sustainability and quality controls.

The highlighted segments in Figure 1.1 include a list of the main research philosophies, research approaches and research strategies, respectively. We will examine the contents of each list later in this section. However, they are by no means exhaustive. In particular, you will come across a wide range of different types of research philosophies. It is important that you read additional literature on these key concepts as it will give you a more in-depth understanding of how they might feature in your own research.

How does the Honeycomb of Research Methodology compare to other research models? Several research methods textbooks show the fundamentals of research methodology in the form of either a linear-type diagram, or a series of layers. Although these types of examples are ideal for highlighting the elements set out in the honeycomb, they often fail to address three key issues. First, although a research methodology chapter typically follows a set structure, you may not necessarily consider each element in the order that it is structured within the chapter. For example, once your research strategy has emerged from your research approach, your next step might be to decide to conduct interviews (data collection) and then choose to analyze a single case (research design). This is why the Honeycomb of Research Methodology not only shows the typical structure of a research methodology chapter by including numbered segments, but also recognizes the fact that the thought process may not necessarily be linear. This is illustrated by showing the six outer elements combining to make up the centre segment, research methodology, as

FIGURE 1.1 The Honeycomb of Research Methodology (©2013 Jonathan Wilson)

opposed to a series of stages or layers. Second, other research models do not always indicate the link or relationship between each of the elements. And finally, the six elements are not always considered in the context of writing a methodology chapter as part of a business research project.

We will now consider the three key concepts of research. Other elements of the Honeycomb of Research Methodology are explored later in the book. Research design is examined in Chapter 5, while data collection is covered in Chapters 6 and 7. Finally, data analysis techniques are considered in Chapters 9 and 10, along with a summary on the relationship between the six elements.

Research philosophy

In general, your research philosophy is linked to your views on the development of knowledge. In other words, what you think constitutes knowledge will impact the way that you go about your research. Subconsciously, this is something that comes naturally. Nonetheless, an understanding of research philosophy is important because it is fundamental to how you approach your research. Mark Easterby-Smith et al. (2002) suggest there are three reasons why an understanding of philosophical issues is very useful. First, it can help to clarify *research designs*. This entails considering the type of evidence required and how it is to be collected and interpreted. Second, knowledge of philosophy can help the researcher to recognize which designs work best. Finally, knowledge of philosophy can help the researcher identify

and adapt research designs according to the constraints of different subject or knowledge structures. In short, an understanding of research philosophy is important as it gets you thinking about your own role as a researcher. Research philosophies are now fully explained in the next section.

Epistemology (what is the nature of knowledge?)

Epistemology refers to the nature of knowledge, which means how we conceive our surroundings. The key question that epistemology asks is 'What is acceptable knowledge?' – 'A particularly central issue in this context is the question of whether or not the social world can and should be studied according to the same principles, procedures and ethos as the natural sciences' (Bryman and Bell, 2007: 16). If you intend adopting an approach similar to that of the natural scientist, then your epistemological approach is likely to be positivist.

Positivism takes an *objective* view when conducting research and is detached from those involved in the study. On the other hand, you may be critical of the positivist approach and prefer to take an active role when carrying out your research. If that is the case, then you are likely to adopt an *interpretivist* view to your research. Unlike positivists, interpretivists often look at one particular subject in-depth. The purpose of their research is therefore not to generalize, but to be actively engaged in their research through high levels of interaction and/or participation.

Positivism and interpretivism are perhaps the two most well-known research philosophies. Each one is different in terms of what constitutes knowledge, although certain aspects can come under the heading of both philosophies. Positivism and interpretivism are essentially related concepts in the sense that as a researcher, whichever approach you choose, you need to produce a convincing set of findings and argue that your findings are valid. Treating the concepts as related is of benefit because it can help to promote mixed methodologies in order to help validate your findings. The next section of this chapter examines the main research paradigms in greater detail.

Positivism

If you assume a *positivist approach* to your study, then it is your belief that you are independent of your research and your research can be truly objective. Independent means that you maintain minimal interaction with your research participants when carrying out your research. Through being detached in this way, the hope is that you can be truly objective. To put it another way, as a researcher your own personal biases have no part in the research effort.

Positivists believe that research needs to be carried out in a scientific nature. It is empirical research that follows a strict set of guidelines and should be carried out by appropriately trained scientists. The carrying out of this research is usually based on a deductive approach, moving from theory to observation. In general, positivists want their findings to have applicability to the whole of a population. Analysis of observations is likely to be quantifiable as opposed to qualitative. Moreover, there is likely to be a high level of reliability to positivist research due to a highly structured approach. Reliability is fully discussed in Chapter 5.

Researchers critical of the positivist approach are likely to argue that interesting insights are liable to be lost if one adopts positivism. For example, *post-positivists* argue that reality can never be fully apprehended, only approximated (Guba, 1990: 22). Post-positivism relies on multiple methods as a way of capturing as much of reality as possible.

Certain studies are unlikely to lend themselves well to a positivist approach. For instance, if you wish to study shopping habits at your local supermarket, as well as establish consumer perceptions governing pricing, you are more likely to adopt an interpretivist view.

Interpretivism You may not agree with the positivist approach because you believe that the social aspects of business are too complicated to be measured along the same basis as the natural sciences. If so, then you might be inclined to adopt the role of the interpretivist researcher. *Interpretivism* is an epistemology that supports the view that the researcher must enter the social world of what is being examined. If you decide to assume an interpretivist perspective, then you are likely to analyze social actors within their own cultural setting. This may involve observations that are qualitative and subjective in nature.

A key factor for the interpretivist researcher is to understand the social world of the research participants. Thus, interpretivists are often interdependent with their research and their research is truly subjective. Interdependent means that the researcher is likely to interact with research participants. In certain circumstances, researchers may even observe research participants while working alongside them (participant observation). This illustrates the interpretivist's view of research as being both collaborative and participatory. The carrying out of this research is usually based on an inductive approach, moving from observation to theory.

Overall, interpretivists view the world as complex and open to interpretation. It is the interpretation of findings that can lead to problems associated with reliability. In spite of this, it is often not the intention to generalize, but to provide interesting new insights into a particular context.

Researchers critical of interpretivism tend to focus on the issue of measurement and reliability. Because studies tend to be qualitative, they do not normally adopt any precise systems of measurement. Consequently, reliability in the sense of accuracy and repeatability can be called into question. For instance, to what extent has the researcher adopted a thorough approach? If a poor record has been kept in relation to data collection and analysis, then it makes it all the more difficult for future researchers to come along and carry out the same piece of work.

Pragmatism The philosophical debate is often centred on the differences between positivism and interpretivism. If you are unable to choose, or believe that your research is not aligned with either of these philosophies, then you are perhaps a *pragmatist*. The pragmatic paradigm does not align itself with any one philosophical stance and recognizes the importance of both the physical and social world. Pragmatist researchers focus on the 'what' and the 'how' of the research problem

(Creswell, 2003: 11). Pragmatism is generally viewed as the most popular paradigm for mixed methods social enquiry (Greene, 2007), although mixed methods could be used with any paradigm. Pragmatists place the research problem and research questions at the centre of the research and use the methods they consider to be the most appropriate in generating the most significant insights into their research. For example, if you are interested in researching how small companies in your region are coping with the current economic downturn, you may believe that the 'best way' to tackle this research question is to interview the owners of the companies and administer a questionnaire survey to employees. In short, this example can be described as taking a pragmatic stance. The focus is clearly on the research problem, while employing methods considered the most appropriate in answering the research question.

Ontology (the way we think the world is)

While epistemology is concerned with 'What is acceptable knowledge?', *ontology* is concerned with the nature of reality. In essence, it asks how we perceive the social world, or to put it another way, the way we think the world is. You need to decide whether you consider the world is external to social actors, or the perceptions and actions of social actors create social phenomena. If you consider the latter ontological stance, then you will adopt the subjectivist view. Subjectivism is clearly linked to interpretivism in that the researcher examines the motivation and social interactions of respondents. As a researcher you need to understand the subjective beliefs and attitudes motivating respondents to act in a particular way. For example, if you decide to analyze management perceptions towards their business networks, you are likely to record a wide range of feedback based on each person's own experience and perceptions. In effect, what you are doing is analyzing business networks based on everyday interaction that management experience. Business networks are therefore viewed by analyzing the subjective experiences of individual actors, namely, management.

Conversely, you may take an external view of the world, associated with objectivism. Objectivism is an ontological stance that implies that social phenomena are based on external realities that are beyond our reach or control. Citing the earlier 'business networks' example, rather than involving social actors directly in the research, objectivism would deal with business networks as being external to social actors. Analysis would then be on treating business networks as tangible objects that are clearly defined and external to the everyday changing interactions involving individual actors.

Axiology (role of values in inquiry)

Axiology is concerned with the nature of value. Although this includes notable ethical issues that we will cover in Chapter 4, axiology is essentially concerned with

the role that your own perception plays in the research. Your values play a role throughout the entire research process. Positivists consider the process of research as value free. One reason for this is that they are independent of their research. Or to put it another way, they are 'from the outside looking in'.

Interpretivists consider that they are interdependent with their research, or in many cases 'embedded'. They are unlikely to be value free as they consider their own values. Thus, the interpretivist needs to work hard to ensure the production of a credible set of results. You will have your own values in terms of collecting and interpreting your data, and presenting your findings. In short, values are included in the research process. Sometimes these values are likely to be explicit. For instance, you may decide to choose judgemental sampling, thereby choosing respondents whom you perceive as 'adding value' to your study. Or the values can be implicit, such as interpreting findings in a cross-cultural study based on your own cultural values.

How do I know which philosophy to adopt?

You may already see yourself as a particular type of researcher. For instance, you may consider yourself to be a more 'creative, hands-on' person, and therefore inclined to think that interpretivism is best suited to your way of thinking. Alternatively, if you see yourself as someone who prefers accurately measuring information, and taking a non-participatory role in your research, then you may opt for a positivist stance. In reality, the approach you take largely depends on your proposed research questions, along with your own assumptions as to how you should go about your research.

Research approach

Research methods are often associated with two approaches – *inductive* and *deductive*. Let us look at each of these in turn. First, Kenneth F. Hyde (2000: 83) defined *inductive* as 'a theory-building process, starting with observations of specific instances, and seeking to establish generalisation about the phenomenon under investigation'. In other words, if you decide to follow an *inductive approach* to your study, you will be seeking to make observations about your research, and then perhaps contribute to a new theory. Conversely, a *deductive approach* 'begins with and applies a well-known theory'. For example, if your research project was focused on cross-cultural management and based on a deductive approach, then you may decide to apply Geert Hofstede's (1980) cultural theory. In other words, you are applying theory rather than attempting to generate new theory through an inductive approach.

One of the main distinguishing features between business research in an academic setting and 'real life' is *theory*. Quite simply, your own research project requires theoretical content. However, an important question you will need to answer quite early on is: 'How will theory feature in my study?' This brings us

to the important distinction between 'induction' and 'deduction'. A *deductive approach* is concerned with developing a *hypothesis* (or hypotheses) based on existing theory, and then designing a research strategy to test the hypothesis. 'In this type of research, theory, and hypotheses built on it, come first and influence the rest of the research process – this type of research is often associated with the *quantitative* type of research' (Ghauri and Grøhaug, 2005: 15). On the other hand, an inductive approach would collect data and develop theory as a result of your data analysis. This type of research is often associated with the *qualitative* type of research. These two types of research strategy are examined later in this section.

At this point, it is worth stressing that I have discussed the dichotomy between qualitative/quantitative research and inductive/deductive. By dichotomizing these terms my intention is to make them easier to understand. Many researchers now challenge such dichotomization by recognizing that there is no reason why overlap cannot take place. For instance,

> as evaluation fieldwork begins, the evaluation may be open to whatever emerges from the data – a discovery or inductive approach. Then, as the inquiry reveals patterns and major dimensions of interest, the evaluator will begin to focus on verifying and elucidating what appears to be emerging – a more deductive approach to data collection and analysis. (Patton, 1991: 194)

The approach you choose may depend on existing literature, e.g. can you see a gap in the literature that needs to be filled, or possibly your type of research questions, e.g. looking at relationships between variables or theory-building. It is worth remembering that if deciding to follow an inductive approach, you need to demonstrate excellent knowledge of the subject. Figure 1.2 shows how theory fits into each approach. Clearly, theory can be applied from the outset (deductive) or be produced as an outcome (inductive). In addition, Table 1.3 summarizes the major differences between deductive and inductive approaches to research.

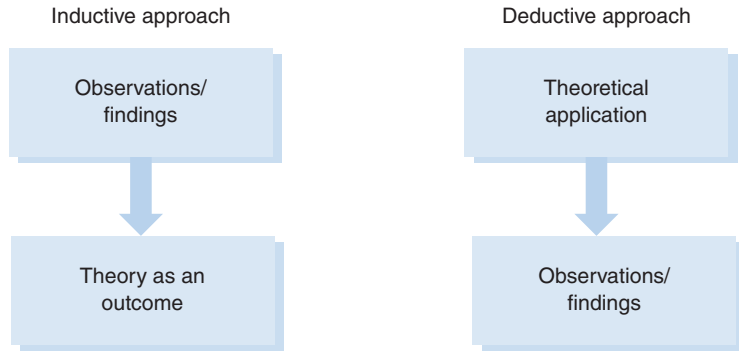

FIGURE 1.2 How theory fits into your research

TABLE 1.3 Major differences between deductive and inductive approaches to research

Deduction emphasizes	Induction emphasizes
• Scientific principles • Moving from theory to data • The need to explain causal relationships between variables • The collection of quantitative data • The application of controls to ensure validity of data • The operationalization of concepts to ensure clarity of definition • A highly structured approach • Researcher independence of what is being researched • The necessity to select samples of sufficient size in order to generalize conclusions	• Gaining an understanding of the meanings humans attach to events • A close understanding of the research context • The collection of qualitative data • A more flexible structure to permit changes of research emphasis as the research progresses • A realization that the research is part of the research process • Less concern with the need to generalize

Source: Saunders et al. (2007)

Once again, Table 1.3 dichotomizes deductive and inductive in order to show you the distinction between the two approaches. This distinction is somewhat ambiguous. For example, an inductive approach could also involve the collection of quantitative data. Similarly, a deductive approach may involve the collection of qualitative data, e.g. through interviews. The table is intended to highlight the traditionally perceived differences between the two approaches. Still, this does not mean that a certain amount of overlap cannot take place. Then why make the distinction? In essence, making the distinction between theory and research by considering deduction and induction can help you to decide how to go about your research. Moreover, it can help you to identify which approach existing researchers are taking in your chosen area of research. For instance, if the majority of researchers appear to be adopting an inductive approach, you may decide to 'add something to the literature' by adopting a deductive approach.

Research strategy

Two terms often used to describe the main research strategies to business research are *qualitative* and *quantitative*. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (2000: 8) described the distinction between *qualitative* and *quantitative* as follows:

> the word 'qualitative' implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency. *Qualitative researchers* stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the research and what is studied, and the situational

constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. In contrast, *quantitative studies* emphasize the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes. Proponents of such studies claim that their work is undertaken from within a value-free framework.

In all likelihood, these are terms that you may have come across before. In short, the main difference is that quantitative research is usually associated with numerical analysis, while qualitative is not. Nevertheless, comparing the two strategies on the basis of analysis is rather simplistic. A number of other key differences also exist. For example, a quantitative strategy is viewed as objective and involves data collection methods such as questionnaires. Yet a qualitative approach is viewed as subjective and involves data collection methods such as interviews. Increasingly, researchers are using mixed methods that offer the advantage of overcoming single-method studies. The next section in this chapter takes a closer look at qualitative and quantitative research.

Qualitative research

Once again, quantitative research examines data that are numerical, while qualitative inquiry examines data that are narrative. *Qualitative research* shares good company with the most rigorous quantitative research, and it should not be viewed as an easy substitute for a 'statistical' or quantitative study (Creswell, 1998). A qualitative strategy is usually linked with an inductive study. As we have already established in this chapter, an inductive theory means that theory is likely to be an outcome, rather than applied from the outset.

Combining qualitative research and inductive theory are common as they are well suited to providing insights that allow for the generation of theoretical frameworks. For example, you might be interested in studying the impact that Chinese cultural values have on Sino-European joint venture performance. If no theoretical framework exists in this particular area, then one option would be to undertake an inductive approach. In the first instance, this may involve identifying cultural values and establishing how these will be measured. Next, interviews might take place with Chinese and European managers involved in the running of the joint venture. This would then be followed by an analysis of your findings. Lastly, depending on your results, you may then propose a theoretical framework that illustrates the relationship between the cultural values and joint venture performance.

Quantitative research

'A *quantitative approach* to research might draw a large and representative sample from the population of interest, measure the behaviour and characteristics of that sample, and attempt to construct generalizations regarding the population as a whole' (Hyde, 2000: 84). Unlike qualitative research, quantitative research is often

associated with a deductive approach. In other words, theory is applied from the outset. Analysis is usually statistical and involves analyzing the results following theoretical application. Rather than generating a theoretical framework as a possible outcome, you would apply an existing theory that would help interpret your findings. Furthermore, because you have probably applied a theory that has been used by several previous researchers, interestingly your results can often be compared with current studies. Using the joint venture example again, let us assume that now that you have analyzed the relationship between cultural values and joint venture performance, you are keen to know how many years managers intend remaining in a joint venture. The nature of this question is objective and will generate numeric or quantitative data.

A comparison of qualitative and quantitative research

One way of describing qualitative and quantitative research is to compare the differences between the two. These differences include:

- the rejection of quantitative, positivist methods by qualitative researchers;
- qualitative researchers believe they can get closer to the actors' perspective through detailed interviewing and observation;
- qualitative researchers are more likely to confront the constraints of everyday life, while quantitative researchers tend to abstract themselves from this world and consequently they seldom study it directly; and
- qualitative researchers tend to believe that rich descriptions are valuable while quantitative researchers are less concerned with such detail (Näslund, 2002: 328).

Qualitative and quantitative methods do not necessarily have to be used exclusively. 'One might use qualitative data to illustrate or clarify quantitatively derived findings, or one could quantify demographic findings, or use some form of quantitative data to partially validate one's qualitative analysis' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Most research projects and researchers, however, place their emphasis on one form or another, partly out of conviction, but also because of training and the nature of the problems studied.

When comparing a qualitative and quantitative study, in a qualitative study, the research question often starts with a *how* or *what* so that initial forays into the topic describe what is going on. This is in contrast to quantitative questions that ask *why* and look for a comparison of groups (e.g. is Group 1 better at something than Group 2?) or a relationship between variables, with the intent of establishing an association, relationship, or cause and effect, e.g. did variable X explain what happened in variable Y? (Creswell, 1998).

Although some students shy away from quantitative research for fear of statistics, it is worth noting that although data collection can be time-consuming and problematic, data analysis is relatively straightforward. This is in contrast to qualitative research where conducting a small number of interviews may seem uncomplicated, yet the analysis, often typing and analyzing interview transcripts, can be

extremely time-consuming. To give you some idea, transcribing a one-hour interview is likely to involve in the region of 5,000–6,000 words!

Finally, your research strategy is likely to be a matter of choice. Once again, it is not simply a question of one or the other. In many respects your strategy does not need to follow a qualitative/quantitative divide. Increasingly, students are recognizing that using mixed methods for their data collection can add value to their study. For example, you may wish to administer a questionnaire survey that explores customer satisfaction in your workplace, while you are also interested in conducting follow-up interviews with those individuals who appear to be particularly dissatisfied.

In short, do not be 'pigeon-holed' into one strategy or the other, but consider the merits of adopting an eclectic approach.

Combining qualitative and quantitative research (multi-strategy research)

In the previous section I briefly introduced the term 'mixed methods' and the possibilities available to researchers for combining qualitative and quantitative research. According to Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998: 17–18), mixed method studies are those that 'combine the qualitative and quantitative approaches into the research methodology of a single study or multi-phased study.' However, arguably this is perhaps taking a simplistic view of so-called 'mixed methods', as research can involve different paradigms, more than one researcher and a number of research methods. In brief, mixed methods are complex and should be viewed at a strategic level. This view is shared by Bryman (2001), who argues that a more suitable term for 'mixed methods' is 'multi-strategy'. This is because 'mixing' implies combining qualitative and quantitative methods in some way. Arguably, a more accurate description is that qualitative and quantitative are not combined, but you have multiple levels. Therefore, for the remainder of this book I will use the term 'multi-strategy' as opposed to 'mixed methods'. Multi-strategy research can be viewed as 'pragmatic research' in that the research does not attempt to 'fit' into any one paradigm, but the researcher uses whichever methods he or she considers work best for their particular study.

What is the rationale for using multi-strategy research?

Prior to considering the merits of conducting multi-strategy research, it is important to note the underlying reasons why some scholars are critical of this approach. First, it can be argued that qualitative and quantitative methods rest on different paradigm assumptions and cannot be easily combined. Second, carrying out multi-strategy research is time-consuming and likely to be expensive. Third, a student may not be familiar with both forms of data and lack the required skills to conduct both qualitative and quantitative research. Finally, carrying out multi-strategy research is rarely an essential requirement at most academic institutions.

Proponents of multi-strategy research cite a number of reasons why it should be a serious consideration when conducting research. These include:

- Multi-strategy research helps to answer questions that can only be answered by combining qualitative and quantitative research. For example, 'Why do respondents provide certain answers in a questionnaire survey?' In other words, qualitative data can be used to determine quantitative results.
- Multi-strategy studies are practical and do not restrict the researcher to 'sticking to' well-defined research paradigms. In other words, it adopts a pragmatic approach to research.
- Multi-strategy research can come across as more comprehensive and in-depth than being restricted to purely qualitative or quantitative. For example, if you decided to research the Eurozone crisis, restricting your analysis to numerical data does not address people's overall opinions on key issues associated with the crisis.

How can multi-strategy research be incorporated into my study? If you are considering using multi-strategy research, a key question is deciding how the combination of qualitative and quantitative research should be incorporated into your study. For example, should qualitative come before quantitative? Should both the qualitative and quantitative phases be conducted at the same time? Creswell (1995) addresses the issue of how and when multi-strategy research should be undertaken by proposing the following four what he refers to as 'mixed method designs':

- Two-phase studies: The researcher first conducts a qualitative phase of a study and then a quantitative phase, or vice versa. The two phases are separate. For example, the first phase might involve carrying out a focus group (qualitative), followed by administering a questionnaire survey (quantitative).
- Parallel studies: The researcher conducts the qualitative and quantitative phases at the same time.
- Equivalent status designs: The researcher conducts the study using both the quantitative and the qualitative approaches (about equally) to understand the phenomenon under study.
- Dominant/less dominant studies: The researcher conducts the study 'within a single dominant paradigm with a small component of the overall study drawn from an alternative design'

(Creswell, 1995: 177).

Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) also propose a fifth design – designs with multilevel use of approaches. The authors describe this design as using different types of methods at different levels of aggregation. For example, data could be analyzed qualitatively at the individual level, quantitatively at the departmental level, qualitatively at the company level and quantitatively at the organizational level.

Writing up and multi-strategy research Similar to data collection, a key issue for multi-strategy researchers is deciding how to write up multi-strategy findings. In essence, if you decide to undertake multi-strategy research, the presentation of your findings depends on which multi-strategy design you have chosen. For example, if carrying out a two-phase study, then it makes perfect sense to present the findings in the order that each research approach was undertaken.

Multi-strategy research from a business setting Multi-strategy research is certainly receiving greater acceptance in the academic community. Evidence of this is that

there is now even an academic journal in this area – the *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* (JMMR). According to the publishers, the journal's scope includes 'delineating where mixed methods research may be used most effectively, illuminating design and procedure issues, and determining the logistics of conducting mixed methods research'.

What is the relationship between research philosophy, research approach, and research strategy?

Earlier in the chapter, the Honeycomb of Research Methodology illustrated the six main elements that make up research methodology. By now, you should begin to see a relationship between the first three of these elements, the key concepts of research, and recognize how choice of research philosophy is likely to influence both choice of research approach and research strategy (see Table 1.4). The intention of this table is to get you thinking about how your own preferences, values and choice of topic may influence your epistemological stance.

Once again, to illustrate the relationship between the key concepts of research, if your epistemological stance is a positivist one, then you are likely to view knowledge as an object (objective), or in other words it exists independently of the mind. In addition, your research approach is likely to be deductive, whilst adopting a quantitative research strategy. In essence, your choice of research philosophy is likely to determine your research approach and research strategy. For example, if you intended applying existing theories for measuring a company's performance, using financial measures and statistical data, while administering a questionnaire to gather this data, then there is a clear thread here from epistemology (positivist), ontology (objective), to research approach (deductive), followed by research strategy (quantitative). If you are taking an interpretivist stance, then your ontological view is likely to consider knowledge as an idea that is independent of someone's mind (subjective), research approach is likely to be inductive, while undertaking a qualitative research strategy. However, pragmatism does not take one epistemological stance, as pragmatists place the research problem and research questions at the centre of the research. In addition, they use methods they consider to be the most appropriate in generating the most significant insights into their research;

TABLE 1.4 Positivism, interpretivism and pragmatism epistemologies

	Research approach	Ontology	Axiology	Research strategy
Positivism	Deductive	Objective	Value-free	Quantitative
Interpretivism	Inductive	Subjective	Biased	Qualitative
Pragmatism	Deductive/inductive	Objective and subjective	Value-free/biased	Qualitative and/or quantitative

typically, this involves multi-strategy research. The researcher adopts both an objective and subjective point of view. Morgan (2007: 71) refers to the relationship between theory and data in the pragmatic approach as a version of 'abductive reasoning' that moves back and forth between induction and deduction. In other words, in terms of ontology, a multiple view is chosen in order to achieve the research question(s).

Finally, remember that your epistemology does not have to be quite so rigid. Your choice in this respect is down to your decision as an independent researcher. When considering your research problem and research questions, you should ask yourself which is your preferred philosophical stance, how this relates to your research approach, and the research strategy required to help you to address your initial research questions.

How Business Research Links to the Organization

Of course, businesses also have to make important decisions in terms of how they approach research, such as decisions governing qualitative and quantitative strategies. Yet, the extent of their involvement in business research often depends on the size and resources within an organization and whether or not it is carried out in-house or outsourced to a third party. We have established that business research is conducted in order to aid business-related decision-making, usually in response to external market conditions. For example, a car manufacturer might decide to conduct research exploring why a particular model has witnessed a sudden decline in sales. However, we have yet to examine how business research links to the organization in terms of how it is carried out and by whom. Frequently, large companies will employ research agencies to carry out research on their behalf, while small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) tend to conduct research in-house. Research may be conducted on an *ad hoc* basis or at regular intervals.

Ipsos MORI is one of the UK's leading market research agencies. Clients include Toyota, Nokia, the BBC and Norfolk County Council. Figure 1.3 shows the possible

Step 1: Norfolk County Council (NCC) commission Ipsos MORI to conduct research into people's views on education provision within the county
Step 2: Ipsos MORI collect data on behalf of NCC
Step 3: Ipsos MORI analyze data on behalf of NCC
Step 4: Ipsos MORI report findings to NCC
Step 5: NCC considers the report findings then takes the appropriate action*

*If NCC is unsatisfied with the service provided by Ipsos MORI, or certain aspects of the findings do not meet with their approval, additional research may be required.

FIGURE 1.3 Possible steps taken by a market research agency

steps Ipsos MORI may take when conducting research on behalf of the UK local authority, Norfolk County Council.

Unlike Norfolk County Council, unfortunately you do not have the luxury of a market research agency to carry out research on your behalf! Nevertheless, essentially the steps involved are not dissimilar to those required when undertaking your own research project. Clearly, your own project will also include a set of objectives, data collection and findings. These stages will be explored in greater detail when we look at 'research process' later in this chapter.

Research Skills

In order to be able to successfully complete your research project, it is essential that you are familiar with the skills required. This section is devoted to what I would call the 'key skills' that should be a characteristic of every student researcher.

Research practitioners and student researchers share similar skills when conducting research. Still, there are some notable differences. First, let us look at the skills required to be a research practitioner. As illustrated in the above Ipsos MORI example, research practitioners are usually working on behalf of a client or clients, and are paid a flat fee for doing so. The size of the fee depends on a number of factors, such as the amount of work involved, the number of researchers appointed, the timeframe, the geographical coverage and the number of agencies able to carry out the research. Obviously, to justify their fee, research practitioners have to portray a range of qualities – communication and presentation skills, an ability to work to deadlines, effective organizational management and attention to detail. Although these do not all apply to a student researcher, certain qualities, such as organizational management and working to deadlines, are certainly relevant.

The next section discusses essential skills that should help you to achieve a better overall performance when undertaking your research project. Let us look at each of these in turn.

Dedication

Undertaking any form of research is a time-consuming and usually an extremely challenging process. Your research project is no different. It is important that you adopt a dedicated approach from the outset. Starting your project a few short weeks prior to the submission deadline is unlikely to produce a piece of work of sufficient standard. Naturally, taking into account certain considerations in your research is likely to lead to higher levels of dedication. If you choose a topic that you consider interesting, you will find it much easier to motivate yourself towards your study. Similarly, if you choose a topic that you already have some knowledge and experience of, this can increase your level of motivation. On the other hand, remember that if you choose a topic simply on the basis of it being perceived as an easy option, you may find it difficult to motivate yourself to complete your project to a satisfactory conclusion.

Responsibility

Both a practitioner and student researcher need to consider areas of responsibility while doing their research. To give you some idea of the responsibilities required of a practitioner researcher, Figure 1.4 illustrates some of the key professional responsibilities expected of researchers working on behalf of the Market Research Society. MRS is the world's largest association serving all those with professional equity in the provision or use of market, social and opinion research, and in business intelligence, market analysis, customer insight and consultancy (www.mrs.org.uk).

1. Researchers shall ensure that participation in their activities is based on voluntary informed consent.
2. Researchers shall be straightforward and honest in all their professional and business relationships.
3. Researchers shall be transparent as to the subject and purpose of data collection.
4. Researchers shall respect the confidentiality of information collected in their professional activities.
5. Researchers shall respect the rights and well-being of all individuals.
6. Researchers shall ensure that respondents are not harmed or adversely affected by their professional activities.
7. Researchers shall balance the needs of individuals, clients and their professional activities.
8. Researchers shall exercise independent professional judgement in the design, conduct and reporting of their professional activities.
9. Researchers shall ensure that their professional activities are conducted by persons with appropriate training, qualifications and experience.
10. Researchers shall protect the reputation and integrity of the profession.

FIGURE 1.4 The principles of the MRS 'code of conduct': MRS Code of Conduct (2010)

Source: https://www.mrs.org.uk/pdf/code_of_conduct.pdf Accessed 20 September 2013

As a student researcher you have a number of responsibilities to consider. For example, if you decide to conduct in-depth interviews, research participants must be asked whether or not they wish the information provided to remain confidential. Second, you have a responsibility to complete your project in line with your own university or college code of conduct on project submission. A key feature of this is likely to be avoiding plagiarism, i.e. claiming that someone else's work is your own. Lastly, you have a responsibility to yourself to make sure that your final project provides an accurate insight into your findings. Several of the points highlighted above relate to ethical standards.

Language

If English is not your first language, it is worth allowing additional time to conduct your research. Having your grammar checked by a native English speaker can also help. Even if English is your native language, you may still lack confidence when it comes to writing up. Reading articles from peer-reviewed journals can help you to

TABLE 1.5 Research methods – examples of learning outcomes

Learning outcomes (threshold standards)	
On successful completion of this module the student will be expected to be able to:	
Knowledge and understanding	1. Demonstrate a critical understanding of the different approaches to research used in business/management and the social sciences. 2. Identify and justify decisions regarding their chosen topic, research questions and research methodology.
Intellectual, practical, affective and transferable skills	3. Synthesize and critically evaluate the current theoretical and methodological developments in their chosen field of study, making clear their own contributions to this body of work. 4. Demonstrate the required skills and abilities needed to successfully plan, organize, undertake and communicate the findings of a piece of small-scale business/management research.

Source: Anglia Ruskin University (2008)

get a feel for the writing style required to complete your project. This is particularly true in relation to the literature review (Chapter 3).

Although you are not writing an English language project, the reader still needs to be able to make sense of what it is that you are trying to say. Avoid simple errors such as 'costumer' (customer or consumer). Essentially, you must show good use of grammar and punctuation in your writing. Many universities and colleges award marks for presentation; this usually includes the level of English. Of course, a sound understanding of Microsoft Word can help greatly when it comes to writing your project. Certainly, electronic tools such as spell-check and a thesaurus are extremely useful. Just remember to set the required English language function!

Finally, anyone can become a solid researcher. This primarily relates to having the required academic ability to fulfil the learning outcomes laid down by your academic institution. Although these tend to vary between institutions, often they are along similar lines. Table 1.5 provides an example of learning outcomes that are likely to be expected of you by your institution.

Academic skills required to complete your project may have been taught to you as part of a research skills module. Still, in some institutions study programmes do not include such a provision. Therefore, a book such as this can help guide you through the research process. In addition, past student projects and peer-reviewed journals can be a useful guide to academic requirements.

During your course you will have studied a wide range of modules. For many students, their chosen topic is often based on a subject they have studied earlier in their degree. If you are studying a BA (Hons) in Finance, for instance, you may have particularly enjoyed corporate finance, and this may then form the basis of the topic for your project. Because you have chosen a subject that you already have

knowledge about, you are more likely to be confident about your ability to produce a competent piece of work related to that subject.

Management

This primarily relates to time management and organizational management. Producing a time management plan from the outset will help you to keep on track with your research. A time management plan that you design for yourself will also allow you to build in the flexibility you need to meet other work/life commitments. Organizational management is also something you need to get into the habit of doing at an early stage in your research. From my own experience as a student, I learned how important organizational management is the hard way. Trying to find dozens of references without an organized record is by no means an easy task! I quickly learned the error of my ways and from then on adopted a strict regime of organization.

As you begin to amass a large amount of data, keeping an organized file will help you enormously. This can be done either using a lever arch file or electronically. Whichever method you choose, you will undoubtedly notice the benefits of keeping an organized file of your work. This is especially true during your writing-up stage.

Research Process

Earlier, I noted that a practitioner researcher and student researcher go through similar stages when conducting research. Yet there are some notable differences. First, as a student researcher your research needs to contain a certain amount of theory. Second, often a key support during your research is your project supervisor. The significance of the supervisor is explained later in this chapter. Given the supervisor's importance, it is something that I will make reference to on several occasions throughout the course of this book.

As is similar to research methodology, the majority of textbooks on research skills make reference to the research process by illustrating a series of stages. In reality, your research is unlikely to follow a logical series of steps. For example, you will probably start at the literature review stage in order to generate ideas. Furthermore, you may find that you have a problem with your methodology and, as a result, you need to go back and rethink your objectives. Basically, what I'm saying here is that by all means use the stages model as a guide, but be prepared to revisit stages, or perhaps even start with the literature review. A typical example of the *research process* is as follows:

- *Establish an intention.* Obviously, you need to have a basic purpose prior to carrying out your research. In the case of your project, your focus will be on starting and eventually completing your research within the time period laid down by your college or university.
- *Choosing a research topic.* Before you start, you need a subject. Generally, your choice of topic is likely to be influenced by what interests you, having suitable access to information, or

perhaps career aspirations. The latter can help become a useful selling tool when attending job interviews following your graduation. The nature of the research topic and how to generate ideas and establish research questions are covered in Chapter 2.

- *Conduct a literature review.* A literature review is an essential part of academic research. Basically, it is an acknowledgement of what has already been written on your chosen subject. It helps to identify 'gaps' in the existing literature that may assist you in forming the basis of your study as well as helping to avoid repetition.
- *Research design.* Your research design is a systematic plan of the data collection and analysis phases of your project. This is fully explored in Chapter 5.
- *Address ethics.* Ethics are the principles and values that underpin the way researchers conduct their research. Although I have briefly highlighted ethics during this introductory chapter, this is discussed in detail in Chapter 4.
- *Collect data.* The process of gathering your data from often a wide range of sources. These are likely to include both primary and secondary data. We will examine the main data collection methods in Chapters 6 and 7, followed by sampling techniques in Chapter 8.
- *Analyze data.* The process of analyzing your results to see the extent to which they address your research questions/hypotheses. The tools of analysis depend on whether you have collected quantitative or qualitative data. These are addressed in Chapters 9 and 10 respectively.
- *Write up.* At some point all that information that you have gathered, probably over several months, needs to be written up. This will fall within the structure of your research project guidelines. Perhaps one of the main questions concerning writing up is when to start. This, along with other issues related to writing up and presentation, is tackled in the final section Chapter 11.

Many students have commented to me that their own research was by no means a linear process. The majority of these tended to consult the literature in order to generate ideas; from this, research ideas were then formulated. Other students place little emphasis on consulting the literature. They know exactly what they want to do and are more likely to follow the typical stages in the research process. It may be that they are mature students and have valuable experience and knowledge about a certain industry, or are perhaps a part-time student who has received support from his or her company to conduct research based on their place of work. Either way, this is really personal choice. The same can be said for the writing-up stage. I have known many students who have started writing as soon as they have sufficient information to be able to do so. Others prefer writing up when all of the relevant stages have been successfully completed. Once again, this is personal choice.

Differences Between Academic and Organizational Research

Academics are often preoccupied with research that helps to build or question theory, and helps develop research approaches. Many universities require academics to publish in leading academic journals. In business and management, these are often journals that practitioners are unlikely to read, such as the *Journal of Marketing* and the *Journal of Consumer Research*. The practical application of these studies is

not always clear. They may be largely theoretical and focus on the key literature, thereby making them irrelevant to many applied researchers.

When it comes to decision-making:

> Qualitative researchers in particular are geared towards providing information that will help clients make a better decision. They, too, build models or theories but perhaps the latter are less formal and often relatively specific to a narrow piece of transient consumer behaviour. Likewise, they have a viewpoint on reality and epistemology but this is less often articulated. Qualitative applied researchers are driven by mainstream commercial reality – a need to attract and retain clients. (Keegan et al., 2008: 108)

I have mentioned that academics build or question theory. Similarly, theoretical application is of course an important aspect to your own research project. One reason for conducting research is to develop and apply concepts and theories. *Basic* (or *pure*) *research* attempts to expand our knowledge about a particular subject. Academic researchers usually undertake basic or pure research. For example, academic researchers might be interested in how consumers make decisions when buying a range of different products. This might involve analyzing their beliefs and attitudes towards a diverse range of brands. Essentially, basic research tends to be of an exploratory nature. Alternatively, *applied research* is undertaken when a decision must be made in relation to a real-life problem. Examples of the research applied researchers might carry out include:

- how to improve medical care provision within a particular town or city;
- how to combat an increase in violent crime; and
- how to increase the usage of public transport.

Researchers working in the commercial sector are more likely to answer questions to specific problems. For example, an organization considering an electronic payroll system for the company's accounts department may conduct research to find out if employees prefer their existing system or the proposed electronic version. In some cases, studies conducted as a result of basic research may have an influence on applied research. For instance, the example above, 'How to increase the usage of public transport', might be influenced by existing basic research findings into what motivates people to use public transport.

Work-based or professional practice project

For some students, there is perhaps a 'blur' between what can be described as academic and organizational research. The reason for this is that many universities now offer bespoke courses to companies. Employees in these organizations are often at managerial level, study part-time, and the course is funded by their employer. Although there is an 'academic element', the research project is likely to be based on the student's employer, and/or their role in the organization. This type of so

called 'work-based' or 'professional practice' project sometimes results in the findings being implemented within the organization. Let us take an example of an online retailer. As part of their work-based project, an employee may intend to find out why shoppers buy online (pure research) and how online sales for their company can be increased (basic research). Once again, from experience, I know that in some instances the empirical findings of such studies have been implemented by a student's employer.

The Role of the Supervisor

A supervisor involved in organizational research usually ensures that his or her team fulfils their research brief. In short, they oversee a particular *research project*. The onus is on the supervisor to make sure that the team carries out a research project within a given timeframe, while meeting a set of predetermined objectives.

On the other hand, an academic supervisor's role is not to manage a student when doing their research, but to play a supportive role. Unlike a supervisor engaged in organizational research, there is no onus on the academic project supervisor to contact the person carrying out the research, in this case the student.

The majority of textbooks on research skills make a rather 'limited' reference to the project supervisor. Although your final research project is probably an individual piece of work, do not be afraid to seek advice and support whenever you feel it is necessary. An obvious point of contact is your project supervisor. Yet, surprisingly, there are some students who perhaps meet up with their supervisor only once or twice during their research. In some cases, no contact is made at all. This is unfortunate. Typically, a supervisor is allocated on the basis of a student's choice of research topic, although there are institutional differences in terms of how supervisors are allocated.

Though I believe no scientific study has been undertaken in this area, often there appears to be a relationship between the number of supervisor–student meetings and the quality of a student's final project. There are perhaps two reasons for this. First, in many institutions the first marker is the project supervisor. Obviously, if you have met your supervisor on several occasions, then you are more likely to understand his or her expectations governing your study. Not only that, their specialist area is likely to be linked to your chosen area of study. Thus, it makes sense to question your supervisor over theories, sources of information and access to data, etc. Second, meeting your supervisor can also help to build your own confidence while doing your research, certainly in relation to overcoming potentially difficult areas.

My experience is that the majority of students are unclear about research methodology yet fail to look for support from their research supervisor. Your supervisor can be a major influence on your project. While much of the responsibility for your success lies with you, the role of the supervisor cannot be ignored. They can be an invaluable source of information regarding literature, idea generation, research methods and writing up. Conducting research can be a lonely business. Quite simply, having a general discussion with someone who is able to relate to your research can be extremely refreshing.

It is vital that you keep your supervisor up to date on your progress throughout your research. They are then able to ensure that you are fully on track with your study and are able to complete it within the timeframe. If you are unclear about any aspect of your research, don't hesitate to ask your supervisor.

In summary, using your supervisor effectively can provide you with a number of advantages:

- Access to an individual who is likely to be a specialist in your chosen topic. Because this is often the case, your supervisor will be able to identify and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of your chosen topic. In addition, they are likely to be very familiar with relevant literature, particularly key authors in your chosen field.
- Whether your supervisor is a specialist in your chosen field or not, they will undoubtedly be familiar with the required structure of your research. Your supervisor will be able to provide you with constructive support and advice governing important chapters such as literature review, methodology and results and analysis.
- Even if you believe that you are familiar with the rules and regulations governing the compiling and submission of your research project, it is still wise to liaise with your supervisor to make sure that you have fulfilled your institution's requirements. For student researchers, particularly international students, rules and regulations governing issues such as plagiarism, word length, extensions, binding and referencing may well be completely alien. Easy marks can often be lost through failure to understand these issues. Sadly, despite the importance stressed to students of adhering to rules and regulations governing the research project, their ability to follow these is often a disappointment.

You can only really capitalize on the above advantages if you carefully organize and plan your supervisor meetings. Fundamentally, this involves three stages: (1) preparation for a meeting with your supervisor; (2) during the meeting with your supervisor; and (3) following a meeting with your supervisor. Each of these stages is addressed below:

- *Preparation*. You must agree a set time with your supervisor and do all you can to stick to the agreed time slot. Failure to arrive on time, or cancelling at the last minute, is unlikely to go down well, especially if it is your first meeting! Also, make sure that you have a predetermined set of questions ready to discuss with your supervisor. Ideally, you should choose a sufficient number of questions to be covered within your allotted meeting time. For example, if you have arranged a 15-minute meeting, obviously arriving at your supervisor's office with a list of 25 questions is far too many! Unfortunately, failure to establish a set of questions prior to meeting their supervisor is all too common among student researchers.
- *During*. Once you meet your supervisor, do not hesitate to work through your predetermined list of questions. It is of primary importance that you fully understand your supervisor's answers to each respective question. If in doubt, do not be afraid to clarify their answer. For example, saying something like 'So, what you're saying is …' or 'Do you mind if I clarify your answer?' Remember that one of the main roles of your supervisor is to guide you through the research process. Therefore, if in doubt, ask.
- Your essential tools during your meeting should be a pencil and notepad. Very few people have the gift of being able to recollect everything that was discussed during a meeting. Hence the need to write things down! Not only should you write down the answers to your supervisor's

Date/time	*Comments*	*Signature*
16 Sept. 2008	Discussed literature review. Key authors recommended – Kotler (1998), Hofstede (1980) and Fang (2001). Some problems with structure – begin by defining key constructs, adopting a critical approach.	Dr Ron Taylor

FIGURE 1.5 Extract from a student/supervisor meeting log

questions, but also a plan of action. In other words, clear targets to be achieved prior to the next meeting. Finally, agree a date and time of your next meeting. I have found that some students like to keep a meeting log with their supervisor. In the main, this includes date and time, along with a summary of the key issues discussed during the course of the meeting. Lastly, the supervisor then signs the meeting log as confirmation that the meeting took place (see Figure 1.5).

- *Following*. When you return home, make sure that you read through, and understand, your notes arising from the meeting. The longer you leave them laying in the bottom of your bag, the greater the likelihood that you will forget suggestions made by your supervisor. Preferably, keep your supervisor meeting notes in a well-organized file for future reference.

How often should I see my research supervisor?

Figure 1.6 illustrates a possible approach to incorporating your supervisor meetings when working on your research project. In short, each stage of the research process involves a meeting with your supervisor. For instance, when deciding on your

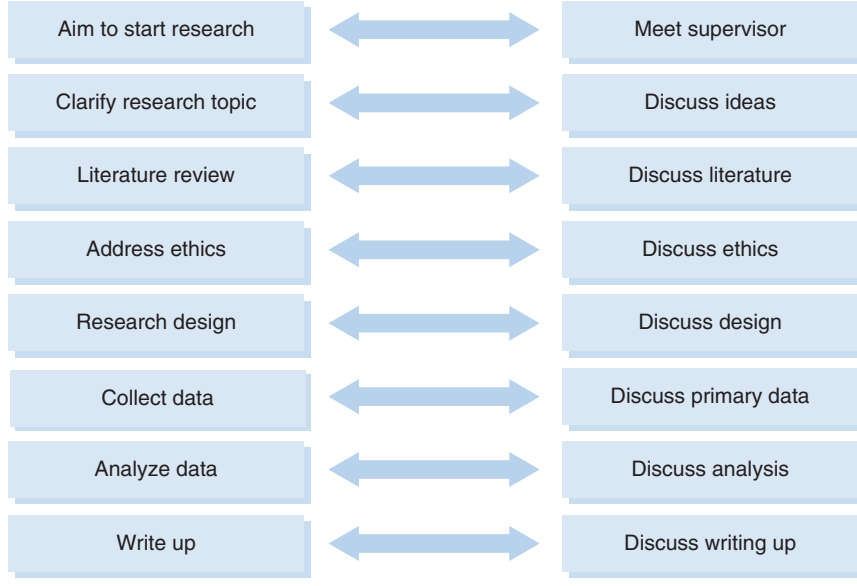

FIGURE 1.6 Research process, including the role of the research supervisor

research topic, you meet your supervisor in order to discuss your ideas. Following your meeting, you can then decide whether or not to act on your supervisor's advice. This may involve developing your topic or, quite possibly, reconsidering your ideas.

Now, I'm not suggesting that all students need to adopt this approach. In reality, some students have sufficient knowledge and experience to carry out a very good research project, involving minimal contact time with their supervisor. Unfortunately, it is often those students who need to see their supervisor the most who fail to arrange an adequate number of meetings. Remember that in most institutions the onus is on the student, not the supervisor, to make contact. A supervisor's specialist knowledge and experience is probably the best source available to students. To not use it will ultimately lead to an inferior piece of work being submitted.

If you have any issues concerning your research project, in most cases your research supervisor can resolve these. The number of times you meet your supervisor is largely dependent on your knowledge of your chosen topic, research expertise, the extent to which you understand your institution's rules and regulations governing the research project and, finally, whether or not you experience any unforeseen circumstances during your project that prevent you from making progress. This can be anything from a change in personal circumstances to problems with your methodology.

RESEARCH IN ACTION

Multi-strategy research

ICT: Is it still a turn on?

Figures about the small and medium sized enterprise (SME) market fly around with alarming regularity – they're spending this, there are that many of them and so on. *The Guardian* has conducted some of its own research to try to quantify the market and find out where it is placed as regards information and communication technology (ICT).

According to *Guardian* figures, there are 4 million small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in the UK, when an SME can have between two and 199 employees. These companies account for 55.6% of employment in the UK and, between them, spent £9.6bn on ICT in 2003, up 21% from 2002. This figure is forecast to grow to £14.4bn by 2006. The larger companies are clearly spending more on technology, with an average of £21,298 going out of companies with 50–199 people, compared to £4,271 from companies with between two and five employees (note, though, that the figures per head work out vastly more expensive for the smaller companies). Unsurprisingly, IT and internet companies spent most in the area, with professional services coming second.

What was more interesting was the qualitative rather than quantitative elements of the survey. Forty-one per cent of SMEs disagreed with the statement 'We only invest in new technology when existing equipment breaks down', and three-fifths of respondents intended to upgrade their equipment in the next year. Presumably, this means more SMEs are noting benefits from staying ahead of the competition in terms of the technology deployed. This ties in neatly with the idea that

the buying decisions are heading out of the hands of the specialist IT staff and, indeed, away from the boardroom – over two-thirds of non-directors are involved in authorizing ICT spend.

Internet awareness is high among the SME community. Even among the smallest companies, comprising between two and five people, 72% have a website, rising to 99% when you look at the top end; an average of 26% of those companies accept orders online and broadband is clearly spreading – an average 67% of companies across the SME spectrum have it. Of the companies with broadband, 59% said it had improved their business performance a lot, 23% said it had made a little difference and the rest said it made no difference at all. Fast upload, download and general internet access were the main benefits.

Of the most interest, however, was the perceptions of suppliers and availability of certain products. Thirty-three per cent of non-broadband companies said they wouldn't get it within the next 12 months because it wasn't available, but they took no account of cable modems or fixed wireless alternatives. Twenty-seven per cent thought most ICT suppliers were not interested in servicing their needs, and 31% felt the ICT suppliers didn't appreciate their needs – these are minorities of course, but substantial minorities.

Finally, wireless technology, although much written about, continues to be a minority pursuit. Although there were variants according to company size, only 32% of companies in the SME sector were using any form of wireless technology. Sixteen per cent were using Bluetooth, 21% had Bluetooth of some description and only 8% were mobile through GSM/3G. Forty-nine per cent of those with the technology felt it was delivering benefits. (Clapperton, 2004)

As illustrated in the above article, by undertaking multi-strategy research the researchers were not only able to determine the amount SMEs spent on ICT (quantitative), but also when SMEs are likely to purchase ICT equipment and their perceptions of suppliers (qualitative). Clearly, understanding the relationship between SMEs and ICT is a complex subject. The premise of using multi-strategy research in this case provides a better understanding of this relationship. If the researchers had undertaken mono-method research, such as a purely quantitative-based study, they would have missed the interesting set of qualitative findings generated from the investigation. Moreover, combining both methods generates more of a 'complete picture' of the phenomenon.

Often, students have ambitions of conducting multi-strategy research. If you think that your own project may involve using multi-strategy research, bear in mind that it remains a challenge for three reasons. First, you may find it difficult to complete your research on time. Second, there is likely to be a financial cost incurred. Finally, not all researchers have the necessary skills required to carry out research of this type. In spite of the potential drawbacks, it is worth considering the merits associated with multi-strategy research in the early stages of your research.

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the concept of research, in particular business research. It has drawn attention to the key concepts of research – research philosophy, research approach and research strategy. The link between business research and the

organization has been discussed, along with the necessary research skills required to be an effective researcher. Here are the key points from this chapter:

- The research questions are the main focus of any project, and can probably best be described as '*the glue that holds the project together*'.
- Research can be defined as a 'step-by-step process that involves the collecting, recording, analyzing and interpreting of information'.
- Methodology is concerned with the overall approach to the research process. This includes everything from your theoretical application to the collection and analysis of your data. On the other hand, methods refer to the different ways in which data can be collected and analyzed.
- The Honeycomb of Research Methodology illustrates the six main elements that make up research methodology, presents the key concepts of research, and provides a framework for structuring your methodology chapter.
- An understanding of epistemology is important because it is fundamental to the way you approach and interpret your research.
- Research epistemologies include: positivism, interpretivism and pragmatism. The latter is typically associated with mixed methods or multi-strategy research.
- Consider whether a multi-strategy approach might be preferable to a mono-method design and think about the implications of doing multi-strategy research.
- Make sure that you make full use of the support and advice of your research supervisor.

CASE STUDY

The Relevance and Importance of Research Methods Classes

David Parker, a final year BA (Hons) student in Business and Management, was now three weeks into his research methods module. The first part of the module had examined research philosophy and introduced the undergraduate research project. Although David had enjoyed earlier modules covering all areas of business, he was finding it difficult to see how studying research methods would benefit his aspirations of becoming an Advertising Director.

Case study questions

1. How would you convince David of the value attached to studying research methods?
2. What are the key skills David requires in order to complete his research project?

YOU'RE THE SUPERVISOR

Angela is currently in the process of starting her undergraduate research project. She has undertaken a short course on research skills as part of her study programme. Angela understands the general concept of multi-strategy research, but is still unclear as to the benefits associated with doing this type of research. She has turned to you, her supervisor, for advice on how she might justify carrying out multi-strategy research.

Supervisor question

- How would you respond to Angela?

COMMON QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. I find starting my research project quite daunting and do not understand many of the terms associated with research philosophy. How important is it to fully understand the terminology?

Answer: This depends on the institution and the level/type of degree programme you are studying on. However, I would say that it is certainly important to know the basic differences between the main research epistemologies. The reason for this is that you will almost certainly be required to make reference to research philosophy in your methodology chapter. This is in addition to being able to justify your research approach. The marker of your project will be looking to see if you have a firm grasp of your chosen methodology in your research project. It is of course very difficult to demonstrate this if you do not have a solid understanding of the key concepts examined earlier in this chapter.

2. As an international student, I have found that the academic requirements associated with doing a research project in the UK are very different to my home country. Where can I go for advice?

Answer: Most universities offer some type of research methods module or workshop that is designed to support students before or during their research. You can of course seek advice from your research supervisor. Your supervisor will be acquainted with the rules and regulations governing content, structure and submission. Moreover, in some institutions you will find that it is possible to read through past projects. For example, the business faculty at my own institution keeps a selection of past projects. The reference library system in place means that students can read through examples of good practice, thus gaining an invaluable insight into structure and presentation.

3. Do I need to meet with my supervisor and what kind of support can my supervisor give me during my research?

Answer: In response to the first part of this question, the short answer is yes! Although the generic research process is typically the same for all researchers, your supervisor is likely to be an expert in your chosen research topic. This means that they are able to recommend key sources of information that you can turn to when carrying out your research. Your supervisor may also be able to provide valuable feedback on draft chapters of your work. Again, whether your supervisor is able to read through work in progress depends on the institution. At some institutions, supervisors are permitted to read through an entire draft prior to submission, while in others, supervisors may not be allowed to read through students' work. Typically, from my experience, the majority of institutions allow supervisors to read through one chapter or perhaps 20% of a student's work before submission. If your university falls into this category, then I suggest asking your supervisor to read through the chapter that you have the most concerns with.

(Continued)

(Continued)

4. How much time do I have to allocate to each stage in the research process?

Answer: There is no easy answer to this question as it usually depends on a number of factors. Not least, the amount of time that you are able to devote towards your research. Obviously, for part-time students and those with demanding responsibilities, the chances are that the research process will take longer. Other issues can also make finishing within the required timeframe challenging. These include: experiencing difficulties with your research methodology, a change in personal circumstances or possibly even your supervisor moving to another institution. In theory, the latter should not be such an issue. As discussed earlier in the chapter, having an effective time management system in place can certainly help ensure that you meet your deadline. Another consideration is that you may find certain stages take longer than expected because of your choice of research methodology. For example, conducting multi-strategy research will ultimately mean that your data collection and analysis will take longer than if you opted for a mono-method design.

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