



An Introduction to Research and Your Study

Introduction

Almost everywhere in the English-speaking world, and in many other parts as well, it is now the case that as a university student of tourism (or related subjects, such as hospitality or leisure) you are required to produce an individual research project. At whatever level, be it undergraduate or post-graduate (Masters), this is likely to be a daunting task for many of you. It is unlike any assignment that you have had to produce before. It is much longer, requires a good deal of originality, and will almost certainly involve you in the gathering of primary data and hence the use of research methods, which you may know little about and believe that you have never used before!

There are a number of terms for the individual student piece of research: 'dissertation', 'thesis', 'report' or as stated above 'project'. Whatever the term used, it is a substantial piece of independent research with the student leading and directing it (Coles et al., 2013). As an undergraduate, you will usually undertake a dissertation in the final year of study. A dissertation for a Masters student will normally be done as the final piece of work, but spread over several weeks or months. A thesis is the name given, in many countries, to the major independent study undertaken by a PhD student. In this book, the terms 'individual research project' or 'individual study' (frequently summarised as either 'study' or 'project') are used for a student's individual independent piece of assessed research. However, the book is aimed primarily at those at undergraduate or postgraduate level who are writing a dissertation.

For your individual research project, you will be required to read more extensively than for other written assignments. The reading will not be confined to one particular, very narrow theme or topic, as may be the case in relation to an individual assignment but will be concerned with the wider

literature that is relevant to the chosen topic. In addition to the literature on your topic or issue, there will also be the need to read literature on the methodology and techniques to be used to conduct your research, as well as literature on how to analyse the results of this research.

To reflect the importance of the research project, it frequently has double weighting in terms of overall assessment marks, is often represented as a double module, and may be worth up to one third of the marks for a course. Therefore, the research project may often be equivalent to at least two, but possibly four 'normal' taught modules and is usually to be completed in the third semester of the overall course programme. The project is the only part of the course concerned solely with research. Additionally, you are left, to a very great extent, to your own devices and will be required to work largely alone over several months with only occasional input from a supervisor.

To many students, the structure of the research project will make it seem as if there are several assignments together, not just one, as each chapter will appear to require at least as much time and effort as an individual assignment. In general, you will be familiar with a fairly short time frame of just a few weeks to prepare for, write and submit a 'standard' assignment. However, your research project will often take months to prepare, write and present.

Whilst in many courses, which are usually made up of related modules, it is unusual to have prerequisite modules. However, in relation to the research project there is almost always a pre-requisite – this is the 'Research Methods' module. It is often the case that one or more of your taught modules has given you the initial idea for your chosen study topic. One of the reasons that the research project is likely to be the last aspect of your course, is that you will usually need time to reflect on your taught modules and your reading, to come up with your topic. However, you may find that you are working on your research project, while still being taught other modules on your course.

Also, in relation to the research project, students are given a supervisor and usually have one-to-one tutorials. For many students this is not just a new experience, but one accompanied by much anxiety. A student will usually be required to prepare some written work, send this to their supervisor in advance and then be prepared to answer questions about what they have written, without knowing in advance what those questions will be.

The way in which the research project is assessed is different from other assignments in terms of the way it is marked and who is involved. You may

be asked to prepare individual sections or chapters of the study, and then these drafts are 'marked' or commented on by the supervisor, before being discussed individually with you. Assignments linked to taught modules are usually marked by the person who lectures on the module. Under normal circumstances, the research study will be marked by the supervisor, and also at least one other person, based at the same institution, who has not been involved in assisting you in writing the project. It is also quite likely that an external examiner will be involved. This person is external to the university or college where you are studying and is involved, not just to consider marks of at least a sample of the research project, but to ensure consistency of standards across all universities in that region or country.

Increasingly chapters, or part chapters, of the research project (at undergraduate and post-graduate level) are being used in assignments prior to the start, or even within the framework, of the research project itself. So, you may be required to produce a draft 'Introduction' chapter as an assignment before you actually start the research project. Also, you may be required to submit a draft literature review, or in some cases even the detailed plan for the methodology of the research project, as assignments, in advance of actually conducting the primary research.

Because of its size and the requirements of energy and time to complete, the research project carries far more weight than any other part of courses. Failing the research project at undergraduate level may lead to a downgrading of your qualification from a degree to a diploma and limit chances of studying. At postgraduate level, failure is not an option, if you hope to gain a Master's qualification.

Why do research?

As Long (2007) indicates, research is what the enquiring mind does. Most people are involved in some form of research almost every day. For example, finding your way to a new educational establishment by asking directions is a form of research. Asking how much food costs in a restaurant, is a form of research, because it involves asking questions. Asking your partner what they want to eat for an evening meal is research. Asking your mother, father, brother or sister what they want as a birthday present is research. However, these activities may not sound like the research that you will conduct in your research project. The similarities are that you are posing questions, with a specific purpose in mind and you are asking individuals (in research terms these are respondents) to answer them. Responses to your questions

will give you information and this may allow you to make decisions and then act on the basis of what you have learned. In fact, much of your life is taken up with making decisions such as: what to wear before going to study, how to get to university, what to eat for lunch, what time to meet friends, when to do your studying.

■ **Common sense?**

Many of the decisions you make are based on having made them before, (in other words using your experience). You have made these decisions on many occasions, so you are likely to regard the reason you have decided as 'common sense' (see Brotherton, 2008). You may also believe that what you regard as common sense, is what others would also agree is common sense. But is this always the case? You may regard it as 'common sense' to walk to university when it is not raining, but catch the bus when it is raining; the main reason for both decisions being to be dry and avoid getting wet. However, you may have a male friend who always walks, whatever the weather, and a female friend who always uses the bus. Are they applying the same 'common sense' that you are using? Your male friend may indicate that the walk to university is part of a fitness regime, and the weather is not important, while your female friend tells you 'I travel with my mates on the bus.' So, it would appear they are applying their own 'common sense'.

'Common sense', as we call it, is therefore really little more than our own individual idiosyncratic behaviour (Brotherton, 2008) based on our experiences, and it varies from person to person. It is therefore not 'common sense' in terms of being 'shared' sense! Common sense is largely a set of beliefs. However, beliefs do not necessarily require evidence to support them. Using 'common sense' is therefore not necessarily a particularly useful way to understand what happens in the world and why it happens.

However, collecting evidence in a systematic way to help understand what is happening now and using this to make decisions about the future is what we refer to as research and should be a far better approach than using 'common sense'. Unfortunately, the notion that 'common sense' is more useful than research seems to be a view held by many who work in the tourism, hospitality and leisure fields. This is compounded by the fact that almost all of us have had leisure/tourism experiences so we can all claim, using our 'common sense' approach, that we are experts!

What is lacking in the 'common sense' view of behaviour in the world, is evidence, and in particular evidence that is accepted by all involved. This is because what we call an 'evidence-base', that all involved in can study and