


Conclusions

Introduction

The conclusions section of any academic publication is largely to provide a summary of what has gone before. So, the Conclusions chapter of your study is there to provide a summary of your previous chapters. In particular, it is meant to summarise your primary research in terms of the results, and analysis of these results. However, it is also meant to provide a summary of the key literature to which you have referred. Your primary research findings are intended to be summarised in relation to these key pieces of literature. In this way you can indicate where you have ‘filled the gap’ in the literature and made your ‘contribution to knowledge’.

Contents of the Conclusions chapter in your study

The Conclusions chapter is intended to provide a summary of your findings, but also do more than this. The summary certainly needs to be there, but although it is a summary, it does not have to be mere repetition of what has gone before. This would be very boring reading and, more importantly, a missed opportunity to inform your reader of the importance of your findings. One way to do this is to

- Restate your aims and objectives near the beginning of the chapter,
- Indicate the key pieces of literature that influenced you in your primary research,
- State briefly how you went about conducting your research, in terms of methodology and specific techniques, and
- Allow this to lead into the summary of the main findings of your primary research.

Using the approach suggested above will enable you not only to summarise key points but demonstrate to your readers that you know that it is important to provide these statements in the final chapter of your study.

However, a key difference between what you write in this final chapter and what you have included in the 'Results' or 'Analysis of Results' chapters is that you will have had time to reflect on your findings and particularly the relationship between your aims and objectives, methodology and techniques, primary research results and analysis and the literature that contributed to your study topic. This reflection should enable you to discern the more important and the less important findings. It should also enable you:

- To see the advantages and disadvantages of your chosen methodology and techniques;
- To reflect on whether you would modify your overall approach and techniques, if you were to do the research again;
- To consider whether it is important or necessary to make recommendations based on your research.

The Conclusions chapter should have other sections, in addition to the summary. An important section should deal with the limitations of your research. Inevitably, your primary research will have been small scale, compared with most published studies. Although you may be under the impression that sending out 250 questionnaires, processing and analysing the 110 that were returned, was a major task for you. However, it is most likely that your sample, by definition, will have been small and hence your findings will not even be at the scale and significance of most published articles in academic journals. Therefore, it is not wise to over-claim for the importance of your results. A section of this chapter in which you outline the limitations is important, as you will be able to communicate to your supervisor and examiner that you are aware that you need to include reference to limitations, as well as actually indicating what the limitations are.

One other section that appears in the Conclusions chapter of many student research projects is titled: 'Recommendations'. This section is meant to include reference to possible future actions. These should be based on the research you have conducted and not 'guesswork' or thoughts you had, perhaps even prior to conducting the primary research. So, the evidence from your research should be used to create these recommendations. However, recommendations may not be necessary – it will depend on your aims and objectives and results. Perhaps the only recommendations that may be required are that you recommend that the research should be done again, for example at a different time, in a different location or with a bigger sample, or possibly, if you were to do the research again, you would change it in some specific way(s).

How to write this chapter in your study

Unfortunately, for too many students, the final chapter appears to be little more than an afterthought. It is a few lines in which some of the important findings may be repeated and a few recommendations (only some of which may be based on the actual primary research in the study) are made. When this occurs, it is a very sad state of affairs and is not likely to lead to a high assessment mark!

An understanding of human nature should inform you, that, as it is the last chapter of your work, you need to take this final opportunity to sell yourself to the reader. You need to maintain the reader's interest and leave them wanting to know more about your research, not because they are confused, but because they are interested and want to praise you for what you have produced. Hopefully, you will have done this in earlier sections of the study as well, but there will not be another opportunity to do this, after the final chapter.

As this is likely to be the last chapter that your examiner will read, he/she does not want to experience an anti-climax. You need to convince the reader that you have carried out a piece of research that has been conducted well and has added something (however small) to our understanding of a particular topic, theme or issue. Note that I have placed 'conducted well' before referring to 'adding something to our understanding' in the previous sentence. Remember, examiners are quite likely to be more interested in whether you conducted your research in a valid manner and achieved reliable results, than the actual details of what you have revealed. As I have written earlier, examiners are generally more likely to be experts in methodology, than experts in your topic.

■ The summary

In terms of what you need to include in this final chapter, you should be aware that a summary is certainly required. However, you do not need the detail provided in earlier chapters, but it should be a summary of the whole study. By this, I mean that you should include discussion of the key pieces of literature that you made use of, as well as summarising your own primary research. Too many students appear to be under the impression that they only need to summarise their primary research. The reason for the inclusion of a summary of the key literature, is, partly, that you can once again demonstrate your understanding of the literature and how it relates to your topic or issue. But, more importantly, by discussing in summary

form this literature again, you can show where your primary research fits within the literature. Hence, you can indicate here how you have ‘filled the gap in the literature’ and made your contribution (however small) to our understanding of this topic, or issue.

You should not add in new findings to the Conclusions chapter. As a summary of the key elements of the study, there should not be the need for new material. However, it is possible that between starting your study and writing it up, a new article has been published on your topic, or issue. You can incorporate reference to this in the Conclusions chapter, but only if it is relevant to your study focus. Also make sure you indicate that it is a very new source of material that has been published since you began to conduct your research. If you do this, it should impress your examiner, as it is clear you are still reading material on your topic/issues, even after conducting your primary research.

However, do not write something to this effect: ‘Having conducted my primary research and written it all up, I discovered last Thursday, by chance, an article in the major journal of..... published in 2005, in which the results are very similar to my research.....’. Your supervisor and probably your examiner will not be happy with this. They will argue that it is your responsibility as researcher, to seek out any appropriate material, particularly if it is in a major journal relevant to your topic, or issue, and you should have found this early on in your literature survey. However, if something like this has happened – you have recently found something of importance that was published a few years ago – you should try to incorporate reference to, and discussion of the article, in your Literature Review chapter.

In the summary that you produce, you should indicate only the major findings from your study. This means that you should summarise the key literature that you have used and its major points of relevance to your primary research. You should provide the key findings from your primary research. These findings should be linked to the key literature. Part of the skill that you are expected to demonstrate, in this final chapter, is your understanding of the key literature and how your primary research findings relate to this. In other words, there is no set guidance on the specific content of this part of the Chapter. You need to select what you regard as the key material and present it in a convincing manner.