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The Literature Review

Introduction

Although your study has an introductory chapter, the first really major chapter in it is very likely to be the 'Literature Review'. This chapter will require a good deal of preparation in terms of reading and probably, depending on your writing style, a number of drafts, before it is good enough to be included in your final document. The nature of the literature you should use in your study, is discussed in the chapter that follows, and it indicates how the review should be written and also how to structure it.

What is literature?

This may seem an easy question to answer. Clearly, there is a very large amount of literature that has been produced over time and continues to be produced. Your initial reaction to the question above may be to say something like 'literature is found in books and other printed works and is made up of words'. But it also includes tables, figures, charts, graphs, diagrams, photographs and maps. So, you could summarise this as 'anything that is written'. However, there is more than this, because literature also includes radio, TV, film, DVD, and of course the internet, so there is a visual and audio component, which, for some types of researcher, is very important. So, it is probably better to think of literature as information. Also, literature in relation to your study is information in the public domain. You can therefore find the information in books and other printed material, in libraries, on the radio, TV and film, but also, increasingly, on-line.

■ On-line resources

Traditionally, students doing their research project would spend a good deal of time in the university library or learning resource centre. This is no longer the case in many countries. Students are more likely to be on-line and the time spent on-line has increased since COVID-19 when physical

access to libraries has been limited. Fortunately, most of the good academic sources for relevant literature, in particular journals, are available on-line and can be accessed remotely. Your university/college will advise you on how to access journals and other library-based material, both within the library and remotely.

For many students, the first place they will go to obtain information is the internet. However, you should be very aware of (and wary about) problems and limitations of internet-sourced material. In terms of preparing the research project, you are meant to be using predominantly academic sources. The main reason is that academic sources are those that can be trusted to be more reliable than other sources. Before being published in a journal, an article will have been read and reviewed (or critiqued) by at least two, or frequently three academics, who are experts in the subject matter of the journal article. These reviewers will suggest any changes they see as necessary, such as adding material or removing material. They may indicate that there are inaccuracies in the material, or something is missing. The review process is meant to be 'tough' and many submitted articles do not get published; those that do usually have to be revised and sometimes substantially revised involving several submission and re-submissions. Hence, journal material is the most *authoritative* that you will be able to access.

Academic books and book chapters may also have been through a similar review process to journal articles, but this does not always occur. Other books may have been through a critical reviewing process, but they may not have been, and it is not always possible to tell. International bodies such as the UN and the EU, national governments, government bodies such as ministries, non-government organisations, charities and private organisations produce reports and similar types of publications. These can be authoritative, if based largely on reviewed academic sources. However, if produced by governments, they may be little more than propaganda. Newspapers and magazines do not go through the same review process as academic journals articles, although there is usually some editorial control. TV and films do not have the same review process as books, although, as with newspapers, there is editorial control.

■ How authoritative is the material?

Remember, anybody can put anything on the internet! Wikipedia is often thought of as an authoritative source of material. However, it may not be authoritative. The quality depends on who is writing the material. Some of the Wikipedia entries are excellent and of a high standard, others are not.

Remember that famous celebrities have often written their own material for Wikipedia and change it when they feel like it! Do not assume that what you read on the internet is accurate or true.

Another very important factor is that it is (too) easy to plagiarise from the internet. Simply 'cutting and pasting' can be too tempting for some students. Remember, most dissertations have to be submitted through computer software such as 'Turn-it-in'. Those caught cheating (plagiarism is cheating) in this way face very severe penalties, usually meaning they have to re-submit their research project, or do another one. In extreme cases of plagiarism, students can be thrown off the course and out of the university.

Below is a summary of major sources of literature for your dissertation with the most authoritative at the top, the least authoritative at the bottom.

- Academic journal articles (most of which can now be found online)
- Academic books and edited book chapters
- Non-peer reviewed academic material/other non-academic books
- Popular media (newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, film)
- The internet (non-journal related).

The rationale for the literature review in your study

Some students believe (wrongly!) that if they are in the process of discovering something new, then there will be little or no literature that it is relevant to their study topic.

Remember that your study will (hopefully) make two types of contribution: one of these is the practical application of your findings, the other contribution will be the intellectual one. This second one is the contribution to literature. It is this second point that is particularly important in relation to the rationale for a literature review in your study. You need to indicate what the literature is at the current time, to show where you have made your contribution.

However, in relation to the fact that the study is to be assessed, you also need to demonstrate that you are very aware of the key writing and important comments about your topic. Your supervisor and your examiners need to know that you are aware of the major literature, as through this, you demonstrate that you are knowledgeable about the topic you have chosen. Without a detailed awareness and a clear understanding of the important

literature, it is very difficult to make a claim about your 'contribution to knowledge', or 'filling the gap' in the literature. In addition, a good literature review gives authority to your study (Long, 2007). It means that you should have established your ability and demonstrated your expertise, which should impress your supervisor and, in particular, the marker of your study.

■ Your research in the context of the literature

A key purpose of the literature review is to indicate that the topic, issue or problem that you have decided to investigate really is worth researching (Thomas and Nelson, 1990). The way in which you do this will be to demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of the past literature in relation to your topic, issue or problem.

In relation to the topic on which you have decided to focus your research, you may have read that certain aspects are controversial. In other words, there may be a lack of agreement on a specific aspect of your issue or topic. This could form the basis of your research project. If you select this controversial aspect of your topic, then it is relatively easy to argue how you are making your 'contribution to knowledge' – it should be adding to the arguments about the topic and will hopefully be providing evidence on one side or the other of the argument. Selecting a controversial topic also provides you with a good rationale for studying it in your project, as even in a small way your research could add to discussions about the topic

Whether or not you have selected a controversial aspect of an issue, your literature review should be written in such a way that it builds the case for the research into the specific issue/topic/theme in which you will conduct primary research.

■ The wider field

You also need to show in the literature review that you are aware of literature that you do not discuss in any detail. This may sound a rather pointless activity, but, in fact, is important for you to show that the topic is located within a broad field of your selected tourism, hospitality or leisure field and this is part of the rationale for studying it, but also that you have not discussed this particular literature, because it is not strictly relevant to your dissertation. This is very much part of ensuring that you do not review everything that may appear relevant (see Case Study 2.1). But mentioning and then not reviewing the particular piece of literature (and saying why you have done this) can be a very important part of writing the literature review.