

**Research Methods for
Business & Management:
A Guide to Writing Your Dissertation**


Firstly ... nothing exists;
secondly ... even if anything exists, it is incomprehensible by man;
thirdly ..., even if anything is comprehensible, it is guaranteed to be inexpressible
and incommunicable to one's neighbour.

Gorgias 500 BC, quoted in Aristotle, *De Melisso Xenophane Gorgia* 980a:19–20

Research Methods for Business & Management: A Guide to Writing Your Dissertation

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Dedications

To my beautiful wife Anne and our children Euan, Eilidh and Eva. There is nothing better in life than to spend time with you. Thank you.

RMacI

To my mother for the constant and continued support, and Diana and Keith for the never ending dinners, and Maggie for some excellent words and rather fine sentences, I could not have done it without you.

KDO

Acknowledgments

The genesis of this book lay in a search for a text that could be used to guide students through the challenges of preparing a dissertation. Having failed to find something which inspired us, we were struck by the vast experience available within our own institution. This book draws upon the talents and accumulated wisdom of our colleagues in the School of Management and Languages at Heriot-Watt University. To our colleagues at Goodfellow Publishers, we remain indebted. Sally, Tim and Mac each showed a willingness to help bring a complex project to market in an unrealistically short time scale. Their calm and stoic acceptance of the production schedule were much appreciated and the professionalism of their work was exceptional. Thomas Farrington played a key role in checking and polishing the manuscript and we are also indebted to him for the speed and accuracy of his work.

KDO & RMacI

Biographies

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Mike Danson is Professor of Enterprise Policy at Heriot-Watt University and has worked widely on issues about urban and regional economic development, island and rural economies and enterprises, demographic change, volunteering, Gaelic, microbreweries and poverty. He has published 13 edited books and over 200 papers. He has advised parliaments, governments, and such organisations as the OECD, European Commission, Scottish Enterprise. Mike was recently awarded the prize for the best book

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Keith Gori is a doctoral researcher in the School of Management and Languages at Heriot-Watt University. His doctoral research engages with Consumer Culture Theory, identity and consumer narratives in the context of the British Home Front during World War Two. More widely his research interests lie in consumer and marketing history, the historical development of thinking surrounding the social responsibilities of business, and experiential marketing. He has presented both historical and contemporary research outputs at international marketing conferences and has published work in the *Journal of Marketing Management*. He teaches on global management and marketing courses in the Department of Business Management.

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Robert MacIntosh is Professor of Strategy and Head of the School of Management and Languages at Heriot-Watt University. He trained as an engineer and has worked at the Universities of Glasgow and Strathclyde. His research on the ways in which top teams develop strategy and on organizational change has been published in a wide range of outlets. He has a long-standing interest in research methods for business and management studies and has published on the relevance of management research using methods that include ethnography and action research. He has consulted extensively with public and private sector organizations and sits on the board of the charity Turning Point Scotland.

Andrew MacLaren is Programme Director of the MSc in International Fashion Marketing in the Department of Business Management, Heriot-Watt University. His PhD explored business elites in the international hotel industry and his current research remains focussed on service products, informed by literature relevant to leadership, entrepreneurship and consumption. With diverse research links across luxury fashion, aviation and the hotel industry, his outlook is international and he works closely with industry throughout Europe, North America, the Middle East, India and China. He has published widely in the field on multiple topics, contributing in the domains of theory, method and industry practice and he continues to work towards interdisciplinary collaborations that engage with multiple fields of research through his extensive industry network.

Gavin Maclean is a PhD Student in the School of Management and Languages at Heriot-Watt University. His PhD thesis examines the work of professional musicians in terms of labour process theory and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice. More widely he is interested in sociological study of work and employment and 'symbolic' forms of work, particularly cultural production, public sector work and multilingualism in the workplace. He teaches on Human Resource and Critical Approaches to Management courses.

Kevin O'Gorman is Professor of Management and Business History and Head of Business Management in the School of Languages and Management in Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh. He trained in Glasgow, Salamanca and Rome as a philosopher, theologian and historian. His research interests have a dual focus: origins, history and cultural practices of hospitality, and philosophical, ethical and cultural underpinnings of contemporary management practices. Using a wide range of methodological approaches he has published over 80 journal articles, books, chapters, and conference papers in business and management.

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Catherine Porter is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Accountancy, Economics and Finance at Heriot-Watt University. In the past she has been a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow, and also worked for the public sector in the UK Department for International Development. She is an economist, specialising in the economics of developing countries, with a particular focus on Africa. She has been involved in the design and fieldwork of several large-scale quantitative surveys in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam. Her research involves the statistical analysis of such quantitative surveys to answer questions around the measurement of poverty, and the effectiveness of policies that aim to reduce poverty.

James Richards is an Associate Professor in Human Resource Management in the School of Languages and Management in Heriot-Watt University, and an Academic Member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. James has published research in human resource management journals, edited book collections and consultancy based reports. James' research interests are grounded in industrial sociology and employment relations. Early research projects looked at employee use of social media for misbehaviour and resistance. His more recent research looks at hidden disabilities in the workplace and he is currently working on a range of in-work poverty projects. James is the Research Ethics Officer for the School of Management & Languages.

John Sanders is an Associate Professor in Management in the School of Management and Languages at Heriot-Watt University. He teaches strategic management courses to both undergraduate and post-graduate students. In addition, he teaches a small business management course to final year undergraduate students. Strategic fit within a university setting was the subject of his PhD. His past research efforts have focused on Internet portals, website quality, social networks and the market reach of rural small firms in Scotland.

Katherine Sang is an Associate Professor of Management in the Department of Business Management. Using feminist theory, her research examines how gender inequality is maintained in male dominated professions, including the creative industries and academia. In addition, Kate is researching gender and in-work poverty and supervising PhDs exploring organisational culture, gender and behaviour change. She is the Postgraduate Research Coordinator for Business Management, as well as serving on the University Undergraduate Studies Committee and Equality and Diversity Advisory

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Rafał Sitko is a Ph.D. student in Business and Management at Heriot-Watt University with research interests primarily in diversity management and inclusion. His work focuses on explaining intersections of privilege and oppression in a workplace and their effects on migrants' work experience. Rafał received an MSc in International Human Resource Management and Employment Relations from Queen Mary, University of London (2012) and a BA in Psychology and Management (2011) from University of Bradford. During student exchange programs Rafał also studied Employment Relations at Hosei University in Tokyo (2010) and Business Administration at Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam (2009).

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Vera Tens is currently a PhD student in the Department of Business Management at Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh. She has an engineering degree from a German university specialising in wood science and technology. She worked in the German timber industry for several years before coming to Edinburgh to do an MBA at Edinburgh Napier University. Before joining Heriot-Watt's PhD programme she worked for a family-owned Scottish company, which raised the interest in doing a PhD in the field of family firms. Her current research interest is future family generations in SMEs, using a stakeholder theory perspective.

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Institutions. Alastair's work is driven by his active industry experience as a senior operational manager and recruiter for a branded organisation. Other projects include spirituality and commitment, and further understanding people's desire, as opposed to their need, to work.

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Preface

After many years of working with undergraduate, postgraduate and research students we recognise only too well the struggles that they often experience wrestling with the somewhat strange and seemingly obtuse language used to describe research philosophy. We once experienced similar difficulties and empathise with the confusion and lack of confidence that flows from being unclear whether you have really understood terms such as *methodology*, *ontology* or *epistemology*. We set out to produce a text that dealt with two problems. The first was to provide something that guides novice researchers through the whole process from identifying a topic to the writing up of findings via engagement with the literature and a brief overview of both qualitative and quantitative techniques. The second problem we wanted to tackle related to what we often refer to as ‘the ologies’. Here we wanted to offer a structured approach to familiarising yourself with the terminology and to demonstrate how a nested set of descriptions builds towards a coherent, comprehensive and consistent articulation of your research paradigm.

We are indebted to our colleagues for their help in delivering on the first of these two problems in the first edition of the book. This was achieved at a pace which seemed frankly ridiculous but which produced a remarkably coherent guide for novice researchers. Despite positive feedback on many aspects of the first edition from both students and colleagues, we were however convinced that we could improve in relation to ‘the ologies’.

For this reason, the second edition features some relatively minor changes to many chapters and a complete rewrite of our account of research philosophy. Central to the revised text is the methods map (see Chapter 4), which sets out a logical process for researchers to articulate their position in relation to five key aspects of their research philosophy. We have road tested this approach with many colleagues and students to ensure that it is clear and concise. In addition, we have developed a free app to accompany the book and this enables novice researcher to quickly develop a comprehensive justification of their particular research design in an interactive way. We would acknowledge that the methods map makes some simplifications and would suggest that for all but the most sophisticated of purposes, this is entirely appropriate. Indeed, if you are well enough versed in the philo-

sophical nuances of knowledge explored in the method map then you are probably not part of our intended audience since you already possess the skills, confidence and capacity to articulate and defend the underpinning philosophical assumptions of your research. For everyone else, we hope that the second edition of *Research Methods for Business and Management* helps demystify the dreaded 'ologies'.

Introduction to the Second Edition

Outside the academic community, the terms *thesis* and *dissertation* are interchangeable. At Heriot-Watt and other universities in the United Kingdom, the term thesis is usually associated with a PhD (doctoral degree), while dissertation is the more common term for a substantial project submitted as part of a taught masters degree (e.g. MSc) or an undergraduate degree (e.g. MA, BSc, BBA etc.).

Often thinking about, rather even than writing, your dissertation is the most stressful part of your degree. It does not need to be. Doing your dissertation is not unrelated to the rest of the writing you have done during your time at university. Many of the skills you already possess can be applied to the dissertation writing process. Identifying the purpose of your project, expressing originality and significance, setting appropriate goals, and maintaining strong organization will help you to develop a high quality dissertation.

Regardless of the information given in this book the most important advice is to engage with your supervisors! Be sure to speak with them throughout the process of writing your dissertation. Be clear about goals and deadlines. When you meet, have questions prepared and make sure you understand their directions. Be proactive about solving problems, rather than withdrawing. Take notes and use the time wisely.

Dissertations have always played a significant role in the awarding of a degree. Originally universities were established with advanced degrees being offered in the vocations of medicine, law, and theology. Over time, the universities have adapted to accommodate changing economic and social structures and demand for skills. Indeed, Whitehead (1932, p. 138f) in an essay welcoming the opening of the Harvard Business School observed,

“The universities are schools of education and schools of research. But the primary reason for their existence is not to be found either in the mere knowledge conveyed to the students or in the mere opportunities for research afforded to the members of the faculty... The justification for a university is that it preserves the connection between knowledge and the zest for life, by uniting the young and the old in the imaginative consideration of learning...”

When the Harvard Business School began, the university was the learning environment and some compromise had been reached between the idealist liberal vision and what Newman (1907, p. 156) called “the disciples of a low utilitarianism”. John Paul II (2000, p. 3) elaborates the mission of a university and states that it is the duty of academics and researchers to make “universities ‘cultural laboratories’ in which theology, philosophy, human sciences and natural sciences may engage in constructive dialogue” and observes that in universities “there is an increased tendency to reduce the horizon of knowledge to what can be measured and to ignore any question touching on the ultimate meaning of reality.” There is considerable scope within a university business school for a genuine plurality of views and disagreement leading to constructive dialogue and contributing to the enhancement of scholarship.

Once, science, engineering and technology, medicine, the law, and divinity were firmly established and a balance between the vocational and the liberal was pursued. Today, some courses may need to recapture some of the values and characteristics of the traditional higher vocations, however, unfortunately, this is not always possible, so often contract trumps covenant in a wide range of contemporary occupations. Far from the demise of the middle class career predicted by some, professionalism and flexibility are highly desirable general features of *graduateness*; learning to learn and the formation of capacities in general should take precedence over the acquisition of specific content. Imagination and creativeness must complement flexibility and cold hard knowledge as preparation for a world of rapid and continuous change; it’s a question of balance.

In many sectors of our society, science is seen as being little short of infallible; anything else must be dismissed as fancy. Even in business journals there is the tendency to trust the so-called hard facts of statistically analysed quantitative data rather than the interpretive results that qualitative analysis tends to produce. However, the physicist Richard Feynman warned his students that when they did research, and before publishing their results, they should think of every possible way in which they might be wrong; whilst another physicist, Alan Lightman, explains the vital importance of this self-questioning approach: “In science, as in other activities, there is a tendency to find what we’re looking for” (Lightman, 1996, p. 104. Feynman’s comment is found on p106).

The ability to take an imaginative leap, beyond accepted scientific dogma and the entrenched views of academic colleagues, disciplinary boundaries, or even apparent common sense, has been at the heart of a significant number of scientific or technological advances in the last few hundred years. For example, throughout most of the 20th century, in medical circles the conventional wisdom was gastric juice caused ulcers, until a pioneering doctor infected himself with a bacterium thus proving that conventional wisdom was incorrect and winning the Nobel Prize for medicine (Van Der Weyden, Armstrong, & Gregory, 2005). In universities today, ethical approval processes might challenge the wisdom, or at least the legal probity, of infecting yourself or indeed others. Nevertheless, the undercurrent in any study of research methods is the slow realisation that everything that we 'know', even in domains that appear to be based on objective fact or cold hard logic can be questioned. As the physicist Max Planck said, "New ideas are not generated by deduction, but by an artistically creative imagination ... Science, like the humanities, like literature, is an affair of the imagination" (McFague, 1982, p. 72).

Kevin O'Gorman & Robert MacIntosh

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