1

Preliminaries

Recognizing Realities

The realities of your situation will strongly influence what you can do. For example:

As a student on a course

- ☐ *What are the course requirements?* You need to know the formal specification for the research project. Things like the type of project expected; how and when it is to be presented – length, format, etc. The general rule is – if they say 'these are the rules', then you follow them. There may be room for negotiation or interpretation if you feel that some aspect isn't appropriate for the project you want to do – but you must get this agreed before proceeding.
- ☐ *What are the expectations of your tutor or supervisor?* To become supervisors people have to be fully qualified and professionally competent. They are your best guide to the development and completion of a successful project. Supervisors are human beings and as such will have their own preferences, expectations and even prejudices about what makes a good project. While the obvious strategy is to go along with them, the good supervisor should welcome your initiative if you come up with reasoned proposals for doing it somewhat differently. If they are not amenable to your suggested approach, do remember that the supervisor has substantially more experience than you. It is politic to follow their suggestions. With the experience of completing this project behind you, you will be in a better position to decide for yourself when you do your next piece of research.

If you are by yourself

- ☐ *Can you get help?* This book will provide support to a lone novice researcher. However it is highly desirable that you find someone to give advice and support, and to bounce ideas off.

One strategy is to sign up as a student at a local college or through the internet. This should get you supervisory support and access to an academic library (and through this to a wide range of Web resources), but the course requirements may set an inappropriate straitjacket on the kind of project you can do. It may also mean that you have to do additional courses which, while they could well assist in you doing a better project, may not fit in with your plans.

If you are doing this as part of your job (whether or not on a course)

- ☐ *What is the expectation within your organization?* You may be doing this project because your boss or line manager has asked you to. This puts you in a strong position because it is in their interest to give you the support needed to enable you to do the job. You need to know why they want the work done, mainly so that you can frame the project in such a way that it stands a chance of answering their questions. But it is also so that you can satisfy yourself you aren't being asked to do something unethical (see 'Avoiding the unethical', chapter 3, p. 66).

Much research by practitioners, whether focusing on their own organization or a different one, concerns meeting perceived needs – of the organization, its clients, customers or users, of workers within the organization, or more widely of the community or area it serves. This has the advantage of helping to justify asking people to give their time to contribute to the project. It also makes them more likely to be involved if it is seen to be trying to meet these needs. It does mean, however, that you have to spend time and effort on finding out about such needs and, perhaps, of reconciling the different needs of different groups.

To everybody

One of the commonest problems of novice researchers (and of experienced ones who should know better) is biting off more than they can chew. They under-estimate how long things take and over-estimate what they can do with the time and resources that they have available. Be warned.

Making It Worthwhile

Two main things make doing a research project worthwhile for you. Firstly, completing it. Secondly, the skills and experience you gain from doing it. Completing it (which includes writing a report) helps justify the time and effort that you have put into it. An unfinished project means that you have effectively wasted the time of the people who have taken part, including yourself.

Doing a research project calls for a wide range of skills and gives valuable experience. These include:

- ☐ *process skills* – such as problem formulation and solving, use of data collection techniques, data analysis, etc.
- ☐ *presentation skills* – such as report writing, data presentation, audience awareness, etc.
- ☐ *management skills* – such as project planning, time management, working with others, etc., and
- ☐ *personal skills* – such as self-discipline, originality, ability to learn, acceptance of criticism, etc.

All of these can, of course, be made much of on your résumé or CV.

A successfully completed project puts you in the position to do better and bigger further projects. It is not uncommon for doctoral and other postgraduate research to have its roots in this first small-scale project. Mistakes and blunders can provide useful learning experiences. They will be etched on your mind, making their repetition highly unlikely (you will just make different mistakes – nobody is perfect!).

Practitioners making a good job of a project are likely to be asked to do more, leading perhaps to a formal research role in their organization. Moreover, the skills acquired can be transferred into other contexts. Many tasks, other than purely routine ones, for those dealing with people as part of their job, involve the central research activities of planning, information or data gathering, analysis and reporting.

Be wary of using people as 'research-fodder'. If people take part in your project and give you time and attention, you should seek to *make it worthwhile for the participants in the project.* This can be through:

- ☐ *Giving feedback* The deal you agree when asking others to take part in your project (see chapter 5, pp. 101–3) should normally involve you undertaking to let them know something about your findings.
- ☐ *Letting them talk* People are often pleased by someone showing an interest in them and relish the opportunity of talking to an interested person about themselves. So, don't just cut and run when you have what you need for the project. It is not unknown for their spontaneous comments to be more interesting than the answers to your carefully crafted questions.

Considering Your Audience(s)

In one sense, you carry out the research for yourself. Perhaps because you want to find out or understand something. Or because it will help you gain a

qualification, or further your career. However, other people come into the picture. You can think of them as audiences for your research. This is most obvious in relation to the report you will produce. If the project is for an award, then your examiners are a crucial audience. There will be a formal specification and you must make sure that you know what this is and stick to it. If it says 10,000 words, you stay very close to that limit.

Much social research carries with it the notion, implicitly or explicitly, that by carrying it out, you might help to change and improve some situation. This has implications for both the content and style of your report. Something written for a senior management team in a business will differ from a report seeking to communicate to volunteers at a centre for young persons with learning difficulties. These issues are returned to in the final chapter.

However, bearing audience in mind is important at all stages of the project. When doing research as part of a formal qualification, your supervisor forms an audience you want to please. They will have views and prejudices to take note of. If you are doing the research as part of your job, it is essential that you find out what your boss or line manager is expecting from the project. And that you plan something which will deliver this (or indulge in a subtle re-education process where you persuade that there is a better way).

To get the active support that you need to carry out a successful project in an organization, it will help not only to have the top brass on your side, but also to be doing something that is potentially helpful to the lower echelons (see the section on gaining access in chapter 5). More generally, whoever act as participants in your study constitute an audience to take note of. Your interactions with them should show respect and consideration for their likely sensitivities.

Considering these multiple audiences influences the nature of your project. Some audiences only respect quantitative, statistical evidence. Others would take more note of rich qualitative data. If you have to satisfy both kinds of audience, you might have to use more than one method or approach, and possibly produce different reports for them.

Individual or Group Research?

There is much to be said in favour of collaborating with others when carrying out a research project. Research is very commonly a group activity, and demonstrating that you have acquired the skills of working with others is another marketable asset. However, some degree course regulations either insist on individual projects or set strict limits on the type of collaboration that is allowed. Check this out.

Types of group research

Group research can take many forms:

- ☐ Forming a group with fellow students or colleagues where the research is jointly designed, carried out and reported on. Decisions are reached via consensus. It is not an easy option and is very risky unless you and the other group members have already got successful experience of working in this way. This approach is commonly not permitted by course regulations, in part because of the difficulty in assessing the individual contributions of group members.
- ☐ Forming a group where several people are interested in the same broad topic and, through discussion, carve out related projects. Details of the design and other aspects of each project are the responsibility of the individual concerned, with other members of the group giving advice and support at all stages. The quality of your project is likely to be enhanced by linking the discussion and findings to those of other group members. Providing that you clearly signal which parts are your own work and which that of others, it would be unreasonable for course regulations to prohibit this form of group working.
- ☐ Forming a group with persons having a role in the setting where your research takes place. This applies particularly when your project involves evaluating a programme, intervention, innovation, or whatever, where there is much advantage in involving the personnel concerned. For example, a project that is focused on problems and issues that they feel are important, is much more likely to get their active co-operation than trying to persuade them to go along with your own pet ideas (see Robson, 2000; chapter 2, for more details about the advantages of this kind of collaboration in evaluations).

Support groups

Even when everyone wants to do their own thing, and the proposed topics are very various, forming a mutual support group is well worthwhile. Group members will have different strengths and perspectives, and will be able to offer comments. Toward the completion of the project, reading of each other's draft reports is very valuable. It is a good idea to agree ground rules for the group at an early stage (e.g. criticism and comments to be constructive; attendance at meetings is a priority; feedback on drafts and other materials to be within one week, etc.). See also the following section 'Working together successfully'.

Supervisor support If, for whatever reasons, you decide to do an individual project, this is fine. Most people do. As already stressed (p. 7), for anyone on a course, your supervisor is a major resource. Teachers want their students to

succeed (partly, though hopefully not solely, because it can take a lot of their effort to help get an unsatisfactory project up to standard). If you are not getting the support you are entitled to, there should be mechanisms for remedying the situation. Be reasonable though. They are busy people and you have your part of the bargain to fulfil through attendance and involvement.

Web-based discussion and other groups You could also consider ways of getting involved in, or forming, a group via the Web. There is a very large number of discussion groups and other Web entities through which you can get advice, and possibly also get in touch with persons in a similar situation as yourself. I have been very impressed by the way in which established researchers are willing to give advice to those less experienced, in discussion groups on a wide range of research-related topics. The usual warnings and safeguards about Web activities apply (see chapter 3, p. 56).

Working together successfully

Booth, Colomb and Williams' Chicago Guide to Writing, Editing and Publishing (Booth et al., 2003) though focused mainly on research in the humanities, provides helpful advice on group working relevant to all novice researchers. Their 'keys for working together successfully' include:

- ☐ *Talk a lot.* They advise setting up conditions which get you talking a lot, through regular meetings, exchanging e-mails, etc. I was particularly taken by their notion that you concentrate first on your 'elevator story' (to a UK English audience perhaps a 'lift tale'). This is how you would describe your project to a stranger in the time it takes to get from the first to the twentieth floor. Polish this at all opportunities so that it sounds convincing both to yourself and others.
- ☐ *Agree to disagree.* You are bound to disagree about some things, but try to keep these disagreements in perspective.
- ☐ *Organize and plan.* Appoint a co-ordinator (facilitator, moderator, organizer if you prefer). Decide whether the role rotates or stays with the same person. It's their job to keep the group on track, through calling meetings, checking progress, moderating discussions, etc. (pp. 27–8).

Project Milestones

Box 1.1 sets out the key elements of a project. It sounds pretty straightforward. In many ways it is, but hidden beneath the surface there are many things you need to consider.

It is self-evident that you need to sort out a *focus* or topic for your project. The 'questions to which you are seeking answers' are the *research questions* which

Box 1.1 Project milestones

Deciding:

1 The focus of your research
2 The question(s) to which you are seeking answers
3 The ways of getting the answers

then:

4 *Seeking* **the answers**

and finally:

5 *Telling* **others what you have found.**

have already been referred to. Coming up with a set of non-trivial questions, which are answerable given the time and resources you have available, is a very useful way of giving a shape to your efforts. It also helps if you are clear about what you hope to achieve by doing the research – its *purpose*. You will find it argued in some texts that the purpose of research is to provide explanations, but very worthwhile research can be mainly concerned with exploration or description.

The 'ways of getting answers' to these research questions are the *research methods*, such as questionnaires, interviews, observation, documentary analysis, etc., which you decide to use.

However, 'ways of getting answers' also refers to the overall approach to research which is selected. There are very different *styles, or strategies, of research* ranging from a tightly controlled experimental design collecting quantitative (numerical) data, to ethnographic approaches relying on participant observation and producing largely qualitative (non-numerical, usually verbal) data.

'Seeking the answers' moves on to actual *data or information collection*. Reliance on existing information (sometimes referred to as documentary analysis, or library research) is a fully legitimate form of research activity, and is the norm in some fields or discipline. However, much research involves active data collection (sometimes referred to as primary data collection), whether inside or outside a specialist laboratory. Non-laboratory, or 'field' research, has its own challenges which often call for good social skills, as well as skills in using the research methods.

'Telling others what you have found' is *writing a report*, which is the essential culmination of the whole exercise. However, before you can write the report, you need to know what you have found. Collected data typically do not speak for themselves. You have to make them talk. This process of achieving understanding of what you have found through *analysis and interpretation* is often

presented as difficult and highly technical. It can be, and you may need specialist help, but often a simple analysis is preferable.

The Structure of the Book

The book is in three parts. The first covers the things you need to get sorted out in advance. The second covers practical aspects of collecting your data. The final part discusses what to do with the data when you have collected them.*

In Part I, following the preliminaries discussed in this first chapter:

- ☐ Chapter 2 tries to help you appreciate some possible approaches to research.
- ☐ Chapter 3 is concerned with selecting a topic and getting you to the stage where you have an initial set of research questions; then deciding what overall style of research will be best fitted to get you answers.
- ☐ Chapter 4 reviews a range of methods you might consider to collect data; then how to choose the one(s) for your project.

Part II is:

- ☐ Chapter 5 and covers the practicalities of actually collecting data.

In Part III:

- ☐ Chapter 6 focuses on what to do with the data, and
- ☐ Chapter 7 deals with report writing.

This is, I hope, a logical, and understandable, sequence. However, it may give the mistaken impression that research is a tidy, essentially linear, process where one moves through the various stages and the report pops out at the end. In practice, it is often much more messy and interactive than this. You may find that there are constraints or limitations on what is possible, which crop up at a late stage and force you to change tack. Or, an opportunity to do something different comes out of the blue. Your reading, or discussions with colleagues or a supervisor, or what you get from participants, may make you realize that what you had proposed was wrong-headed. Pilot studies may reveal that you have grossly under-estimated the time things take, etc. (see chapter 5, p. 105)

Specific 'non-linear' aspects to consider include:

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* Strictly speaking 'data' are plural – the singular is 'datum'. However it is often treated as a singular noun. I prefer the plural, but it's up to you.

- ☐ Being prepared to revisit your initial research questions and revise them in the light of the way things are turning out. At one extreme you may find, toward the end, that you have found answers to different questions! Be grateful for such mercies.
- ☐ Sorting out any arrangements for access and ethical clearance as soon as you are reasonably certain of the nature and design of your project.
- ☐ Ensuring that your design is such that you will be able to carry out any analyses you need to do (e.g. that sample sizes are large enough for particular statistical tests to be possible). This means that you need to know how the data will be analysed before they are collected.
- ☐ Starting writing at an early stage. Don't leave it all to the end. Drafts of substantial chunks can be done along the way. Many potentially high quality projects are ruined by a mad scramble to complete the analysis and the report, trying to meet what has become an impossibly tight deadline.

End-of-chapter Tasks

Each of the chapters is followed by a set of tasks. These are suggestions about things to do, arising from the material covered in that chapter. Whether you complete all, or even any of them, is obviously up to you. My recommendation is that you:

- ☐ *Start the chapter 1 tasks now*, or at least as soon as practicable.
- ☐ *Then read through the whole of the book* so that you get a feel for all aspects of completing the project. Don't worry at this stage if you don't understand everything. Note the tasks and perhaps give some preliminary thoughts about what you might do, but don't actually complete them.
- ☐ *Return to the beginning and*, working in 'real time' (i.e. the time dictated by the requirements of the project) *go through the chapter tasks* broadly in sequence, rereading material in the chapter as necessary. It may make sense to combine tasks for different chapters depending on how things work out.

Further Reading

Robson, C. (2002) *Real World Research: A resource for social scientists and practitioner-researchers*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Blackwell. A big book. It takes the same general approach as this text but goes into considerably greater detail at a somewhat higher level. Use it for following up specific aspects relevant to your project, or if you feel the need for additional background on doing research.

Chapter 1 Tasks

1 *Get a project diary.* This is a notebook in which you enter a variety of things relevant to the project. It can take many different forms but I like to have a nice quality one with hardback covers and not just a loose-leaf writing pad. I suspect that, psychologically, if you have invested in something like this, it gives an added impetus to keeping a quality record. Who knows, it might be the start of your career library of project diaries. An alternative is to have the equivalent of this diary on your computer (make sure you keep back-ups). The kinds of things which might be entered into your diary include:

- ☐ notes of all meetings and data collection sessions relating to the project – particularly of meetings with a supervisor. If the data, or full notes are somewhere else, give details of where they are.
- ☐ appointments made, and kept
- ☐ notes from library, internet and other information-gathering sessions
- ☐ memos to yourself about any aspect of the project – what you are proposing to do and why
- ☐ notes about the modification of earlier intentions and why they are made
- ☐ responses to the later tasks in the book
- ☐ reminders of things to be done, people to be chased up, etc.
- ☐ taking stock of where you are; short interim reports of progress, problems and worries; memos to yourself of bright thoughts you have had (get it down before you forget!), suggestions for what might be done.

The diary can be invaluable when you get to the stage of putting together the findings of the project and writing the report. It acts as a memory jogger, and an invaluable brake on any tendencies to rewrite history. It is, in itself, a learning tool for future research projects.

2 *Start using it.* In particular it will be useful if you can write down a short account of your initial thoughts about the project you are hoping to do (don't worry if you are not at all sure at this stage – it's what you do by the end that counts). Half a page, or so, is enough. There is a lot to be said in favour of doing this before reading further as it will then be possible for you to look at it later, and gain insights into how far you have travelled in the process of doing the project.

3 *Investigate possibilities for collaboration.* If the idea of carrying out your project on some kind of group basis interests you, then now is the time to find out what may be possible:

- ☐ Is it allowed? Are there regulations or rules that forbid group work – or particular kinds of group work? Find out.
- ☐ Are there other students you could work with? If so, get together and sort out what kind of group you can agree on. Get started by sharing ideas on what topic(s) you might go for.

Even if a group project of some kind is not possible, for whatever reason, everyone can benefit from being part of a *support group*. Set one up now.