



**DOING YOUR
RESEARCH PROJECT**

Fifth edition



DOING YOUR RESEARCH PROJECT

A guide for first-time researchers
in education, health and social science

Fifth edition

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Open University Press

Open University Press
McGraw-Hill Education
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Shoppenhangers Road
Maidenhead
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England
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world wide web: www.openup.co.uk

and Two Penn Plaza, New York, NY 10121-2289, USA

First edition published 1987
First published in this fifth edition 2010

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A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

ISBN13: 978 0335 23582 7 (pb)

ISBN10: 0335235824

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
CIP data applied for

Typeset by RefineCatch Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed by Bell and Bain Ltd, Glasgow



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have been helped throughout the preparation of all five editions of this book by the interest of friends, colleagues and former research students who have given strong support in often difficult times.

I am particularly grateful to **Brendan Duffy** and **Stephen Waters** two outstanding former research students who have read and commented on drafts of all the chapters in the fifth edition and have again allowed me to include some of their ideas and research experiences in this edition. They have both been a great help. Brendan also wrote Chapter 7 'The analysis of documentary evidence' in earlier editions and I am grateful he has found time to update the chapter again this time.

My thanks to **Gilbert Fan**, Singaporean-based former post-graduate student of the University of Sheffield, who permitted me to quote parts of his MED literature review in Chapter 6 and to **John Richardson** and **Alan Woodley**, both of the British Open University who have again given me permission to quote from their journal article 'Another look at the role of age, gender and subject as predictors of academic attainment in higher education' (Richardson and Woodley 2003).

Two friends, in spite of coping with heavy work schedules, still managed to find time to update the items they wrote for the fourth edition. **Dr Jan Gray** provided more detail to the narrative

inquiry sections she wrote in Chapter 1 and **Katie Waterhouse** added updated detail to the 'Top ten guide to Internet searching' in Chapter 5. My thanks to you both.

In my experience, I have found that good librarians generally know everything about most things and so I 'persuaded' **Richard Pears**, co-author of *Cite Them Right* (Pears and Shields 2008) and faculty support librarian at Durham University library to read and comment on Chapter 5 ('Literature searching'). He commented in great detail and also brought me up to date about online search facilities in libraries – and a great deal more. My apologies for this imposition Richard, but also my thanks.

Long-suffering **Fred Bell** once again took on the boring task of reading all the scripts and checking that the figures, tables, graphs and the like matched the texts. As usual he winced at what he regarded as some of my oversimplifications and 'unscientific' language, but I have long since learnt which of his complaints and objections to ignore and which to accept with gratitude.

My continuing gratitude to **Michael Youngman**, formerly of the University of Nottingham who devised the question types in Chapter 8, which have eased the burden of many research students who are in the early days of designing questionnaires and interpreting the results. The generous assistance and support he invariably gave to many struggling PhD students, including me, made the difference between our dropping out altogether and actually finishing.

I have always enjoyed **Chris Madden's** mazes which have appeared on the front cover of all editions of this book and I was delighted to learn that he had agreed to provide another maze for this fifth edition. Thank you Chris. I can still smile (or sometimes even laugh out loud) at the pictures of distraught researchers going down blind alleys, kicking the computer, losing patience and wondering why they ever started on the research in the first place. Yes. Been there; done that. However, the overall image is of students who managed to negotiate the maze and, having overcome the difficulties experienced by all researchers, are seen to be leaving it deliriously happy, in academic dress, holding their diplomas on high, throwing their mortarboards in the air and going forth to do more and even better research. The book would not be the same without the maze.

Nor could this fifth edition have been produced without all of your support and encouragement. To you all, my grateful thanks.

Judith Bell



INTRODUCTION

This fifth edition of *Doing Your Research Project* follows the same tried and tested format as in all the previous four editions, but with updated and new material. As always, it is intended for those of you who are about to undertake research for what I refer to as a 100-hour project, an undergraduate dissertation, or a postgraduate thesis.

Regardless of the topic or your discipline, the problems facing you will be much the same. You will need to select a topic, identify the objectives of your study, plan and design a suitable methodology, devise research instruments, negotiate access to institutions, materials and people, collect, analyse and present information, and, finally, produce a well-written report. Whatever the size of the undertaking, techniques have to be mastered and a plan of action devised which does not attempt more than the limitations of expertise, time and access permit.

Large-scale research projects will require sophisticated techniques and, often, statistical and computation expertise, but it is quite possible to produce a worthwhile study with a minimum of statistical knowledge. We all learn how to do research by actually doing it, but a great deal of time can be wasted and goodwill dissipated by inadequate preparation.

This book aims to provide you with the tools to do the job, to help you to avoid some of the pitfalls and time-consuming false

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trials that can eat into your time allowance, to establish good research habits and to take you from the stage of selecting a topic through to the production of a well-planned, methodologically sound and well-written final report or thesis – *on time*. There is, after all, little point in doing all the work if you never manage to submit it.

No book can take the place of a good supervisor, but good supervisors are in great demand, and if you can familiarize yourself with basic approaches and techniques, you will be able to make full use of your tutorial time for priority issues.

● Part I

PREPARING THE GROUND



APPROACHES TO RESEARCH

It is perfectly possible to carry out a worthwhile investigation without having detailed knowledge of the various approaches to or styles of research, but a study of different approaches will give insight into different ways of planning an investigation, and, incidentally, will also enhance your understanding of the literature. One of the problems of reading about research reports and reading research reports is the terminology. Researchers use terms and occasionally jargon that may be incomprehensible to other people. It is the same in any field, where a specialized language develops to ease communication among professionals. So, before considering the various stages of planning and conducting investigations, it may be helpful to consider the main features of certain well-established and well-reported styles of research.

Different styles, traditions or approaches use different methods of collecting data, but no approach prescribes nor automatically rejects any particular method. **Quantitative researchers** collect facts and study the relationship of one set of facts to another. They use 'numerical data and, typically . . . structured and predetermined research questions, conceptual frameworks and designs' (Punch 2005: 28). They therefore use techniques that are likely to produce quantified and, if possible, generalizable conclusions. Researchers adopting a **qualitative perspective** are more concerned to understand individuals' perceptions of the world. They

doubt whether social ‘facts’ exist and question whether a ‘scientific’ approach can be used when dealing with human beings. Importantly, Punch draws our attention to one important distinction which is that ‘qualitative research not only uses non-numerical and unstructured data but also, typically, has research questions and methods which are more general at the start, and become more focused as the study progresses’ (2005: 28). Yet there are occasions when qualitative researchers draw on quantitative techniques, and vice versa. It will all depend on what data the researcher requires.

Classifying an approach as quantitative or qualitative, ethnographic, survey, action research or whatever, does not mean that once an approach has been selected, the researcher may not move from the methods normally associated with that style. Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses, and each is particularly suitable for a particular context. The approach adopted and the methods of data collection selected will depend on the nature of the inquiry and the type of information required.

It is impossible in the space of a few pages to do justice to any of the well-established styles of research, but the following will at least provide a basis for further reading and may give you ideas about approaches you may wish to adopt in your own investigation.

Action research and the role of practitioner researchers ●

Action research is an approach which is appropriate in any context when ‘specific knowledge is required for a specific problem in a specific situation, or when a new approach is to be grafted on to an existing system’ (Cohen and Manion 1994a: 194). It is not a method or a technique. As in all research, the methods selected for gathering information depend on the nature of the information required. It is applied research, carried out by practitioners who have themselves identified a need for change or improvement, sometimes with support from outside the institution; other times not. The aim is ‘to arrive at recommendations for good practice that will tackle a problem or enhance the performance of the organization and individuals through