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1 Introduction

If you are thinking of starting to research for an MA, MPhil or PhD, then this book should help you at each stage of your work. Initially, it will help you to decide what and how you want to research, where you would like to undertake your research qualification and study, and how to work with a supervisor. Then it will tackle how to keep the momentum going over time and how to analyse your findings and draw conclusions from these. Finally, it will help you to see how to produce a good quality dissertation or thesis which, we hope, will pass.

Starting to undertake a research degree is a very exciting and also a rather daunting undertaking, because you know that it is a next step up in your learning. You will probably have heard of friends or colleagues who started a large piece of research once, took years and years over it and never finished. But you will also know people who have really enjoyed and benefited from undertaking a research degree. My own experience as a part-time, female research student working at a distance from my supervisor and home university as well as combining a full-time job (and commuting) with study, certainly had its ups and downs. It did, however, change my life and it changed my sense of my own achievements. I have never regretted the work and have always been pleased I gained the degrees (first an MA, then a PhD). It is through this experience that I wanted to write this book, as well as out of the exciting and fruitful work I have been involved in with research students and supervisors over the past few years, particularly a large cohort of professional part-time research students from Israel, and with supervisors new to supervising in my own university (Anglia Polytechnic University). The intention is to enable you to see clearly what you want to research, how to go about it and how to work successfully towards achieving your aims.

The book draws on good practice developed at a wide variety of universities in Australia, the USA and the UK. I am grateful to colleagues from Australia, the UK, Israel and lately South Africa, who have engaged

in immensely useful conversations with me, pointing me towards local good practice and sharing their own strategies. Most recently this led to a companion book for supervisors entitled *Good Practice in Postgraduate Supervision* (Wisker and Sutcliffe 1999), and some of the ideas in that could also be useful to you in your work with your supervisor.

Of course, you will receive a great deal of support and guidance from your university and your supervisor(s). Having this book as a guide-book should, however, help you to take control of and responsibility for your own learning and to know what kinds of questions to ask as much as what the answers to some of those questions are, as you proceed on your research journey.

One of the biggest growth areas in higher education is postgraduate work. More students than ever before are deciding to continue with their studies, or to return to postgraduate study to research for a qualification, after some time in paid or voluntary work or bringing up children. There is now a diverse group of students seeking postgraduate study and it is no longer only the lifetime career academic who seeks research study qualifications. There is also much international movement as many research students wish to gain the enriching experience of studying in another country, most commonly the UK, the USA and Australia. The greatest growth in groups of research students is that of women, and women returners in particular, who often combine study with jobs and domestic responsibilities. Many other students undertake research when they have retired from full-time employment. They too, like so many others engaged in research, are seizing the opportunity to 'do something for themselves at last'. The diversity of research students has helped to bring about development and change in research supervision practices and in universities' practices of support for and recognition of the needs of research students. This book takes note of the differences in demands of students from different cultural contexts and takes into account different social, age and gender backgrounds. It also takes note of the different kinds of postgraduate research study in which students are engaged.

Students embarking on research for qualifications are considered in this book in three related groups: those working towards their Master's, particularly the MA, and those working for an MPhil or a PhD, with the latter qualifications substantially different from the former for reasons of length, depth, and originality. Some students study on taught courses at all three levels while others undertake research-based studies. At PhD and MPhil level there is also, more

recently, the development of a professional doctorate, sometimes called an EdD (education doctorate), where appropriate, or a doctorate in professional practice. These developments recognise the integration of and synergy between professional practice, employment and work-related study and research, and they are often different in shape from established research. Doctorates by publication have also recently been recognised and these, too, are different in shape. However, all involve research, and anyone undertaking any one of these qualifications will find this book useful. We will be looking at these variants and concentrating on what is in common between them, that is, *the process and the practice of research*, which is the main focus of this book.

The book really starts where I know I did, and where so many of my own research students began, with some basic advice, some questions to answer and things to think about. The opening sections of each chapter outline the issues to be discussed. There are reflective questions to consider and some strategies, plans and exercises to try out which aim to get you to concentrate on planning and managing your research. The more complex developments are in the middle of each chapter and a conclusion sums up main points covered. The book as a whole follows the line of development of a research project, whether a relatively short-term project for an MA (probably around a year's work), or a longer project for MPhil and PhD (between three and six or more years' work, depending on whether you carry out full- or part-time research). You will need to pick and choose your way around the book as different questions arise for you in your work. Treat it, in other words, as a useful sourcebook, like any other in your research. It is one to which you can refer when you need to, but which also provides an underpinning to your study.

Each chapter asks you to become involved in reflective (or active) tasks to help you to focus further on your work. These should aid the reflection on the progress and process of *your research* – activities which in themselves are a key to good research.

► **What the book does not do**

This book cannot guarantee you success. The hard work still rests with you. As you develop your own working relationships with supervisors, your research area and university, and as you also develop autonomy, you will appreciate that there could not be a manual which

successfully guaranteed that at this level. It is a complex, original and creative activity.

This book is specifically addressed at social science and humanities students; it does not aim to guide science students, although those undertaking health-related research should find it useful (and scientists might find some parts useful too).

► **What the book does and how it is structured**

The book gives basic advice as well as signposts to more specialist research methods and I hope that you will find that it is accessible and clear in its presentation, and includes the basic points you will need to look at in your research. There are four parts:

- 1 Starting research
- 2 Getting going – supervisors, methods and time
- 3 More detailed research methods – maintaining momentum
- 4 Support, progress, analysis, writing up, the viva, presentations and afterwards.

There are ‘task’ boxes to enable you to consider how research methods could work for you and to help you with your thinking towards your research projects. The book endeavours to direct you towards reading which leads you to further *specialist research methods training*. It does not try to replicate here the books that train the use of, for example, statistics, but instead asks fundamental questions that enable you to make some choices about appropriate methods and underpinning methodologies.

In outline it:

- takes you through generic decisions about titles, areas of study, the methods and methodology of research, timing, contracts, and so on
- deals with issues and practices common across different subject areas and levels in the social sciences and humanities
- branches out, where relevant, to consider the different levels of Master’s, MPhil and PhD It defines the kind of difference related to original work or work which contributes to the PhD, and the issues around contribution to practice and experience which much

Master's work now involves. It also looks at how to ensure this all takes place

- consistently reflects on the different needs of international students.

You will see the book is structured in relation to the four phases of a research student's work, that is:

Part 1 Starting research

This concentrates on:

- starting your own research
- choosing universities
- choosing topics
- defining the area and asking research questions

Part 2 Getting going – supervisors, methods and time

- understanding and taking control of your own learning
- getting into good study habits and managing time
- literature reviews, notes and referencing
- selecting research methodologies, theories, methods and practices
- starting to work with your supervisor – agendas and contracts

Part 3 More detailed research methods – maintaining momentum

- maintenance and development of ideas and research practices, restructuring and refocusing issues and practices
- continuing to maintain good working relations and supervisions with your supervisor(s)
- restructuring to taking into account findings and new questions, new reading and ideas, and so on
- maintaining momentum
- ensuring pilot studies inform further developments, analysing your data and producing and building on your findings
- recuperating after difficulties with data and respondents
- making a leap in conceptual awareness
- dealing with underlying values, knowledge and structure-based difficulties

Part 4 Support, progress, analysis, writing up, the viva, presentations and afterwards

- analysing data
- writing transfer documents, progress reports
- supportive research cultures
- building in time for seen and unforeseen problems
- what makes a good quality research piece, especially a PhD
- editing
- re-editing to keep to length
- ensure organisation develops thesis
- ensure thesis raises and deals with problems
- diagram design and presentations
- protocols
- submission formats
- vivas
- rewriting and resubmission if it goes wrong
- conference presentation
- publication
- the difference between MPhil- and PhD-level work

Outside the research, the writing up and the viva, the book then looks briefly at presentations, conferences and publications – getting your work out into the broader research area – and life after research, that is, what you might do next.

Good luck! I hope you find the book helps you achieve your aims in your research.

Further reading

Wisker, G., & Sutcliffe, N. (eds) (1999). *Good Practice in Postgraduate Supervision*. SEDA Occasional Paper 106. Birmingham: SEDA.

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