

Section 1

What should my research definition look like?

It is strongly advised that you follow the structure below because it forces you to be clear about each stage of the research. Sophisticated research terminology has been avoided but you need to be aware that the Research Committee will be assessing your Research Definition on the basis of stringent criteria.

1. Summary.

The proposed title of the research is presented together with a short summary that gives a concise overview of the issue you intend to investigate and what you hope to find out.

2. Literature and the knowledge base.

You have to demonstrate that you have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the existing knowledge base in your chosen research area. You will have read a selection of the relevant literature including research publications, degree dissertations and theses, journal articles, etc. You should develop a discussion that illustrates the existing literature base as far as you understand it, with your own views and comments where relevant.

3. Research question aims and objectives.

The research question might be:

“Is technical leadership the principal driver of project success in IT program management?”

Your research aim might be:

To show that technical leadership is the principal driver of project success in IT program management.

Your research objectives might be:

- *To identify the five main drivers of project success in IT program management.*
- *To quantify each driver relative to the other drivers.*
- *To isolate the importance of technical leadership.*
- *To assess technical leadership relative to the other drivers in the context of IT program management.*

In other words you express a question then convert it into a research aim which you then break down into individual research objectives. The question, aim and objectives must be clear and must all relate logically to each other. You will probably find this difficult to do but it forces you to be clear about what you intend to find out.

4. Research methodology.

The research could be based on a quantitative approach (i.e., collecting largely numerical data and using appropriate statistical methods to analyse it) or a qualitative approach (such as interviews, questionnaires, etc.) or a combination of the two approaches. The methodology might be based on a whole series of different methodological approaches. For example you may

propose a single longitudinal case study (i.e. study one organisation over a significant period of time) and a larger number of cross sectional case studies (i.e. study multiple organisations at a point in time). You might propose the use of research interviews and research questionnaires using a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques. Again you will probably find this difficult to do at this stage but it is vital that you have thought about the general issues involved.

5. Access.

To collect data you have to have some kind of sample such as a number of different companies or organisations that agree to take part in your research and provide you with data. They might do this, for example, by allowing you to issue questionnaires to their employees or by allowing you to conduct interviews with people at different levels within the organisation. They might allow you access to company records, etc., so you can develop an additional line of data by looking at records and historical documents, etc. You may intend to use the organisation you work for as a sample or you may intend to contact a number of organisations and ask them to assist. Whatever your intentions you must convince the Research Committee that you have and will continue to have sufficient reliable access to data.

Section 2

What are the most common reasons for TSR applications and Research definitions being unsuccessful?

A Research Definition which fails on any of the above five issues is unlikely to be accepted. Some typical reasons for rejection are listed below.

- **The proposed area of research is not compatible with the rationale of the DBA program.**
The proposed area of research must relate to some aspect of applied business or management. For example, testing an hypothesis in physics would not be acceptable.
- **The proposed area of research is not viable.**
The scope of the research is so wide that it could not be achieved within the resources expected of a DBA.
- **The proposed area of research is not sufficiently original.**
The proposed research can be based on existing knowledge or it can be an extension of existing knowledge but it must make a contribution to knowledge.
- **The aim is not clear.**
It might not be possible for the Research Committee to identify exactly what the research is meant to find out.
- **There is insufficient evidence of knowledge and understanding of the existing knowledge base.**
A researcher has to know and understand the existing knowledge base before he or she can design research. Practical experience is no guarantee that a subject area is properly understood.

- The proposed methodology is inadequate.**
The research methodology must provide sufficient detail for the Committee to be able to discuss and evaluate the viability of the proposed methodology that is intended to achieve the research aim. At this early stage it amounts to being clear about how you intend to collect data and an indication of how you will analyse it. For example you might want to base your research on a highly statistical quantitative base where you take a large sample and extract quantitative data that you analyse using purely statistical or mathematical techniques. At the other extreme you may design a methodology that involves virtually no quantitative analysis and is, instead, based on a purely subjective approach.
- The data cannot be accessed**
The research definition typically requires support information such as where you intend to gather your data and what companies or organisations have agreed to allow you access to their people and other resources.

What feedback do I get?

The Research Committee does not have the resources to provide detailed feedback on each research definition. If you receive an outright rejection you can be sure the research definition has failed on most of the criteria. If the Research Committee feels that your idea has promise it may recommend you resubmit with a brief indication of what you should aim for.

Section 3

Example research definitions

Here are two sample research definitions together with the Research Committee appraisal of each section and the overall judgement.

Example 1: A Research Definition accepted by the Research Committee.

Title

Identification of successful launch strategies for new products in the toy industry.

Summary

Every year two thirds of all new toy products fail but there is no apparent pattern. Some toys with seemingly similar characteristics succeed and others fail. My hypothesis is that the approach to product launch causes success or failure rather than the product characteristics. My company launches 12 new toys in a typical year and I intend to chart the launch strategy of each and identify the factors contributing to success and failure.

Research Committee comments - Clear statement and potentially of considerable value to toy companies.

Literature and/or knowledge base.

A great deal has been written about product launch strategies in the marketing field but it tends to focus on the match between product characteristics and targeted consumers. I intend to widen the scope by taking into account supply chain issues, alignment with overall strategy, human

resource issues and post launch implementation. In the past five years I have project managed 10 product launches and clearly need to structure this experience.

The literature base in this field is based on the work carried out by Bloggs (1964). Bloggs theorised that there is a fundamental functional relationship between optimal launch strategy and the characteristics of the competitive environment. Bloggs' theory was critically appraised by Jones (1965) and Smith (1970). Both researchers published peer-reviewed papers supporting the broad findings of Bloggs' original work. More recent studies have included works by Walker (1999), Pringle (2001), Johansson (2006) and Moore (2008). The vast majority of the current literature base was reviewed by Ellery (2009) in his PhD thesis of that year.

The studies vary greatly in their scope, ranging from Walker's detailed study of three companies to Moore's wide ranging statistical approach. The research would have to start with a closer evaluation of these studies.

Research Committee comments - Made good use of the review by Ellery but lacks the research tools to critically evaluate previous studies. If the research is extended into the HR field gaps in understanding may emerge.

Research question, aims and objectives

Based on the literature review I have developed the following research question, aims and objectives.

Research question: What is the relationship between launch strategy and subsequent success and failure?

Research aim: To establish the relationship between different launch strategies and subsequent success and failure.

Research objectives:

- To define the four approaches to toy launch strategy
- To define success and failure over a relevant time period
- To classify the launch strategy for each new toy in one year
- To relate the four strategies to success and failure
- To identify the factors within the strategies contributing to success and failure

Research Committee comments - The research objectives get down to the detail of defining launch strategies. Given applicant's experience this could be a worthwhile exercise in its own right.

Research methodology

I intend to use a largely quantitative approach. I intend to design a program of interviews and questionnaires over the course of six months. The responses will be recorded and analysed using standard analysis package XYZ. This will produce data that will then be analysed using SPSS. The basic approach will be to collect and analyse hard data to measure the frequency of occurrence of two different events and then establish a functional relationship between.



Research Committee comments - Demonstrates a grasp of data collection and analysis but needs to take into account that there are many other issues that affect success, such as the reaction of competitors. Issues of sampling and survey design can be resolved at the Research Proposal stage. There is clearly scope for the collection of qualitative data during the interviewing which could add depth to the empirical results.

Access

I have secured the full cooperation of my employer. I have guaranteed access to 5 different project teams operating within a large multidisciplinary organisation and operating over a 1-year period. I have been given access to all project team members to conduct a total of 100 interviews. I have attached copies of letters from my immediate report and company director confirming that the company will co-operate with the research and allow me to access the level and quantities of data required.

Research Committee comments - Applicant has clearly convinced employers and colleagues that this is an important study.

Research Committee decision - The research tackles an important business issue and has the potential to add to existing knowledge mainly because the applicant has unique access to data. Should be accepted to study Introduction to Business Research 1 to formalise understanding of research methods and then proceed to Mentoring.

Example 2: A Research Definition rejected by the Research Committee.

Title

Developing effective cost control in business IT projects by the use of PRINCE2.

Summary

It is very common for business IT projects to be considered unsuccessful because they go over cost. In many cases this occurs because the company concerned does not have adequate cost control systems in place and/or because procedures are not standardised and adequately controlled. My research will compare business IT project cost control in companies that use PRINCE2 with companies that do not use PRINCE2 and will demonstrate the improved performance that can be expected by the effective application of this established planning and control process technique.

Research Committee comments - Starts with a preconceived idea of what will be found out. PRINCE2 is not the only method of cost control; it does not require research to predict that the total absence of cost control is likely to be accompanied by cost overruns.

Literature and/or knowledge base

The literature on cost control and PRINCE2 is extensive. There are numerous established cost control systems in operation today. In his PhD thesis Jones (2007) surveyed the use of PRINCE2 in business IT companies and identified a number of key areas where the application of PRINCE2 improved the degree of control and likelihood of successful implementation. Jones (2007) suggested the main reason for this was the reduction in uncertainty enabled by the use of PRINCE2. This suggestion was endorsed by Smith (2008) and Walker (2009) but partly refuted

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by Bloggs (2009), who suggested the primary driver of effective cost control and management was the accuracy and reliability of the cost planning process.

PRINCE2 itself is a long established procedural framework and its use and application have been well reviewed in the literature (Cooper (1998), Dunne (2000), Franks (2001), Peterson (2002)). Numerous companies use it as a standard planning and control technique while others use it in parallel with proprietary and in-house cost planning and control techniques (McLeod 2007).

A number of researchers have considered PRINCE2 specifically in terms of cost control in business IT applications including Mason (2000), Peters (2001) and Terry (2003). These researchers all concluded that PRINCE2 reduces cost uncertainty and is instrumental in improving the likelihood of business IT projects being completed within the overall cost limits set at the estimating and planning stages.

Research Committee comments - Demonstrates familiarity with PRINCE2 and what has been written about it but does not adopt a critical perspective and is unable to draw conclusions to guide the research.

Research question, aims and objectives

The literature and knowledge base suggests the following research question, aims and objectives.

Research question: Does the use of PRINCE2 increase the likelihood of business IT projects being completed within budget?

Research aims: To show that PRINCE2 increases the chances of completing business IT projects within budget.

Research objectives:

- To show that business IT projects that use PRINCE2 tend to perform better in terms of cost than projects that do not use PRINCE2.
- To identify the reasons for this difference.
- To show that the majority of these reasons occur as a direct result of the use of PRINCE2.

Research Committee comments - The initial impression that the applicant intends to 'prove something' is reinforced.

Research methodology

I intend to use a largely qualitative approach based on informal interviews and discussion with the organisations concerned. I intend to embed myself within the project teams and develop a detailed understanding of how decisions are made by directly observing how it is done within the teams. I don't intend to use any numerical/statistical data. Where appropriate I will refer specific decisions and subsequent performances to the relevant areas of PRINCE2.



I'll be using embedded/grounded theory research techniques developed by Smith and Jones (2002) to observe and record individual and group interactions within my sample teams and the observational classification system developed by Adams (1997).

Research Committee comments - This appears to be an attempt to find out what happens in IT teams; there is no mention of how costs are to be extracted, how the PRINCE2 system is to be compared with other cost control systems or how data on outcomes is to be compared. It is totally impressionistic. The applicant does not have the Accounting competence required to extract relevant data.

Access

I have also secured the approval of my company board to allow me access to all levels of project and program management and to collect whatever data I feel to be relevant for the duration of the research project (copy letter attached). In addition a total of 10 different organisations have agreed to allow me access to their project managers to conduct interviews. These organisations have also agreed to allow me on-going access to project team meetings over a 6-month period (copy letters attached). I also intend to design and implement a short validation study to test my findings against the business IT sector in general.

Research Committee comments - Has good access to employees but it is not clear if applicant has access to detailed cost data.

Research Committee decision - The Research Definition fails on all criteria. It is poorly defined and sets out to prove a case rather than to identify the many factors that affect IT project overruns. Reject.

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