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Topics and Research Questions in Students' Research Proposals at the Budapest Business School

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Introduction

Kothari (2004) defines research as an academic activity, and „the term ‘research’ refers to the systematic method consisting of enunciating the problem, formulating a hypothesis, collecting the facts or data, analysing the facts and reaching certain conclusions either in the form of solutions(s) towards the concerned problem or in certain generalisations for some theoretical formulation” (*Kothari*, 2004:1).

Since research is an academic activity, students are required to conduct a research as part of their dissertation. But according to *Babbie* (2013:18) „there is no one way to do social research”, there are many valid research approaches. Familiarity with research approaches helps students to do their own empirical studies and it is „also necessary for understanding and assessing existing research” (*Flick*, 2015:14). Universities might offer courses on research methods to help the students, but *Flick* (2015) implies that for many students, completing these courses seems to be an unpleasant duty and to learn methods can be exhausting and painful. However, to take part in these courses can be also useful, because „in most research processes, students work with empirical data (...) which can form a concrete link between theory and everyday real-life problems” (*Flick*, 2015:14).

The course „Research Methodology” at the BBS

Introducing the course „Research Methodology” at the BBS aims to provide students with an advanced integrated knowledge and understanding of research methods, and to develop the key transferable skills required in social research. All students in the third year at the Budapest Business School, College of Commerce, Catering and Tourism are required to take part in the course. Not only BA programmes in Hungarian but also the BA

programmes in foreign languages (English and German) offer the subject for their students. The course requirements are uniform, so every student has to meet the same requirements – regardless of the language of instruction.

Course outline (retrieved from the course website)

The main topics of the course consider the relevant aspects of research methodology:

- The range of research methods: primary and secondary research, qualitative and quantitative approaches, cross-sectional and longitudinal research etc.
- Research paradigms and ethical considerations in conducting a research.
- The research process: how to design a research, how to select a topic, and how to formulate research questions.
- Qualitative strategies: considerations in conducting observations, case study design – various forms, content analysis (sampling documents to be used, coding data and data analysis), interview (structured and qualitative interviewing, focus groups, considerations in data collection, analyzing interview data)
- Quantitative strategies: survey/questionnaire (questionnaire design, question types in questionnaires, pre-testing, data analysis).

Objectives and requirements (as displayed on the course website)

The course gives a brief introduction to the major considerations and tasks involved in conducting research, particularly in the area of business and tourism. It introduces the essential aspects of designing, supporting, and conducting a research project. Those who successfully complete the course will be able to produce a well-developed research proposal, select appropriate methodology with which to conduct the research and carry out a minor research project.

The sessions consist of both theoretical input and practical work, and participants are expected to actively take part in class work and do home assignments. At the end of the semester the students are required to write a research proposal which gives them opportunity to demonstrate their familiarity with the practical application of issues in research methodology.

All information about the course, theory, task sheets, articles and useful links are available as electronic materials through Coospace, the Virtual Learning Environment platform of the school. The students have also access to the expectations on how to produce a well-developed research

proposal: requirements of structure and content (Figure 1), a sample research proposal, and the evaluation sheet.

Figure 1. Requirements of format, structure and content of a research proposal (based on Szokolszky, 2004:541-542)

Research Proposal	
Format and Layout Requirements	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Max. 1000 words• Header: name and Neptun code flushed left in the header of each page• Layout: justified• All margins 2.5 cm• Line spacing: 1.5 lines• Font: Times New Roman 12• No figures or pictures
The Structure and Content of a Research Proposal	
	Title
	1. „Background” of the research <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Research topic / problem• Relevance of the research• Aims of the research• Research questions / hypothesis
	2. Methodology <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sample• Research methods and tools• Expected results, usefulness and relevance of the research and the results
	3. Timescale of the research
	4. References (7-10 sources, max. 3 online sources)

The aim of the current study is to analyse research proposals submitted by students in the Hungarian instruction course. The research questions focus on the topics and research questions selected by the students: Do they display the characteristics of a well-focused research topic and the characteristics of a good and well-formulated research question?

Characteristics of a good research topic and a good research question

Selecting a research topic is the most important factor that one has to make in conducting research. It is not a simple task but a very complex phenomenon (Khan, 2008). According to Boudah (2011) defining or diagnosing a problem is key to designing and conducting a research. Without adequately defining the research topic and the research question(s), students can waste time and develop an inadequate approach to the research problem.

What makes a well-defined research topic and a good and well-formulated research question, is a problem that students face when

developing their research topics. It appears that students find rather difficult to select their own research area and formulate their own research questions. Unless they are assigned a research topic by the supervisor, they are unable to identify the characteristics of good research question, neither can they formulate one.

One of the main characteristics is clarity. A good research topic should have to be clear for others and free of any ambiguity. Clarity also involves that the research topic should be easily understandable and should direct the research. A well-defined research topic means having a clearly defined and specific goal for the study. A well-focused research topic is specific and relevant. It should neither be too broad nor too narrow, and it should focus on current issues from many different aspects. „A topic has to be specific enough to be clearly defined and yield helpful results from a later literature search” (Boudah, 2011:23).

According to *Creswell* (2003:28) „to actively evaluate a topic to a research study calls also for reflecting on whether the topic can and should be researched”. The problem of „should” is more complex than the question of „can”. It is important how the topic contributes to the body of research available on the topic and how much the results will benefit the field of study. No less important is whether anyone outside the research area would be interested in the topic and whether the topic relates to the researcher’s personal goals (Creswell, 2003).

Boudah (2011) suggests that a research question is a way of expressing researcher’s interest in a problem or phenomenon. The research question(s) should be clear and specific, refer to the problem or phenomenon, reflect an intervention in experimental work, and note the target population or participants.

Creswell (2003) advances „several principles involved in designing qualitative research questions, quantitative research questions, objectives and hypotheses, and finally, mixed methods research questions.” (Creswell, 2003:105) He argues that in a qualitative study the research question has „two forms: a central question and associated” (Creswell, 2003:105) subquestions. „The central question is a statement of the question being examined in the study in its most general form” (Creswell, 2003:105). It is a broader, general question and it should begin with „what” or „how” „to convey an open and emerging design” (Creswell, 2003:106). „Hypotheses, on the other hand, are predictions the researcher holds about the relationship among variables” (Creswell, 2003:108).

Creswell (2003) examined a number of mixed methods studies and found that „there is a distinct lack of models on which to base guidelines for writing research questions” (Creswell, 2003:114), but he identified some common characteristics. He found that „mixed methods studies need to have both qualitative and quantitative research questions (or hypotheses) included in the studies to narrow and focus the purpose statement. These questions and hypotheses should incorporate the elements of good questions and hypotheses already addressed in the qualitative and quantitative approaches” (Creswell, 2003:114).

According to *Punch* (2014) a good research question should organise the research project and give it a direction and coherence. It also should delimit the project by showing his boundaries and keep the researcher focused during the research.

The course website also summarizes the characteristics of a well-formulated research question: it guides the literature search, decisions about the kind of research design to employ, decisions about what data to collect and from whom, analysis of data, writing up of data, and it can stop the students from going off in unnecessary directions. A well-formulated research question also do-able as well as be worth undertaking, it needs to be – like the good research topic – relevant, specific, clear, well-defined, and it should lead to new information.

Topics and research questions in students' research proposals in the Hungarian instruction course

In the first semester of the academic year 2015/2016 ca. 150 students participated in the course „Research Methodolgy” at the BBS. A previous study (Szóke, 2016) analysed 17 research proposals in the German language programme at the BBS CCCT and found that the research proposals did not meet fully the requirements of the format and the content of a research proposal. The research proposals covered a wide range of topics within and beyond the field of tourism, but most of the topics were not researchable in their actual form. Most of the research questions did not meet the requirements and were not suitable. Possible reasons can be writing the research proposals „last minute”, which influenced both the format and content of the proposals, and the fact that the (German) language of the proposals was poor, and grammatical and lexical mistakes impede understanding.

The present study examines 38 research proposals submitted by the students in one of the Hungarian instruction courses. The research proposals analysed covered a wide range of topics, too. 24 proposals were related to tourism, six proposals had a topic associated with hotel industry, and eight proposals dealt with further topics beyond the field of tourism (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Research topics in the research proposals

Topic	Tourism	Hotel Industry	Other
Number of Proposals	24	6	8

The most popular topics were festivals (4); internet/social media and tourism/ hospitality (4); and terrorism and tourism (3) (Figure 3). Whereas the other proposals within the field of tourism/hospitality had various themes such as bike tourism, ethical tourism, rural tourism, health tourism, wellness hotels, hotel chains etc., the proposals beyond this field

varied in their topics from issues in job perspectives for BBS CCCT students to moral development of children.

Figure 3. Most popular research topics in the proposals

Most popular topics	
Festivals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The role of SZIGET festival in tourism • Festival tourism • Analysis of the habits of the Summerfest festival goers and the festival's impact on the tourism of Százhalombatta • Vans Warped Tour, the successor of Hegyalja?
Internet/Social Media & Tourism/Hospitality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tour operators and booking tourism services online • Relationship between tourism and the websites of small towns • In the net of the virtual world • Impact of social media on gastronomy
Terrorism & Tourism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impacts of terrorism on tourism • Impacts of terrorism on the travel patterns of Hungarian people • Impact of terrorism on tourism

As the examples above show, too, many topics did not meet the requirements of a good research topic. There were 21 topics from the submitted 38 which were too broad and not as specific as expected. The other 17 proposals covered a thoughtfully selected research problem, and the topics were relevant in the field of Hungarian tourism and hospitality. The research backgrounds described confirmed that the students are able to narrow down the problem and to define specific goals for their research. Most of these proposals applied case studies with mixed methods approaches.

Ca. 79% of the proposals included research questions, but three dealt with hypotheses, and four included both of them (Figure 4). Almost every proposal containing research questions had a main question and associated subquestions.

Figure 4. Research questions and hypotheses in the research proposals

RQ	Hypotheses	Both RQ and hypothesis	Whitout
30	3	4	1

Not only the proposals describing case studies but almost all proposals applied mixed methods approaches in the research methodology but they had more qualitative than quantitative research questions. The research questions generally began with „what” or „how”, but there were often closed ended questions, too.

The most serious problem with the research questions was that the students mixed the research subquestions with questions asked in a survey/questionnaire. Most of the subquestions were not well-formulated research questions. They displayed rather the characteristics of survey questions by being too simple and mostly closed ended questions.

The research proposals in the Hungarian instruction course compered to those in the German language programme mentioned above met the requirements of a good research topic and a good research question to a larger extent. The format and the content of these proposals were far more suitable than the proposals in German language.

Conclusions

Although the course „Research Methodology” at the BBS CCCT offered many materials in order to help students to write a research proposal the submitted proposals revealed a lack of knowledge of a well-focused research topic and a well-formulated research question.

Only less than the half of the proposals covered a well-justified research problem and defined specific goals for the research. A large number of the proposals applied mixed methods approaches.

The results of this study show that students should be more trained in narrowing down research problems and writing research questions. A carefully and adequately selected research topic and the well-formulated research questions are essential in a good research design. The success of the whole research process depends on how well the research topic is selected and how purposefully the research questions are formulated. The fact, that the course is also offered in the second semester of the academic year for other students, and the experiences in the first semester give the teachers opportunity to fine-tune the course outline and requirements, and share good practice with each other.

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