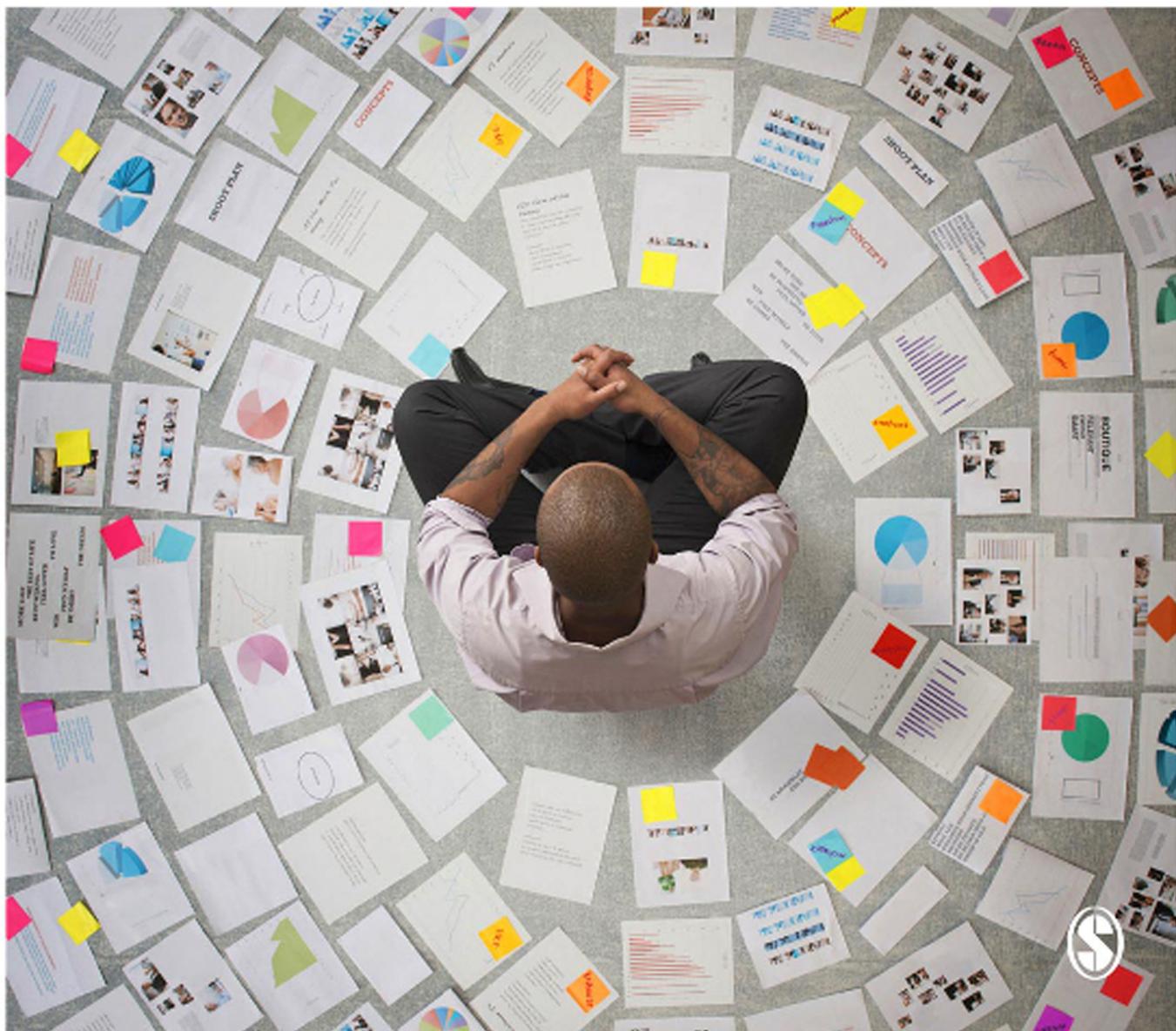


John Beech

DOING *Your* BUSINESS RESEARCH PROJECT



DOING *Your* **BUSINESS**
RESEARCH PROJECT



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Preface

Let's face it – nobody ever met the prospect of doing an undergraduate business **project** with squeals of delight!

That's not to say that you won't be delighted when you finish it, both in the sense 'Thank goodness I've finished!'; and in the sense 'Hey, I'm really proud of that!'. The aim of this book is to ease you towards those two particular pleasure zones, especially if your starting point is one of uncertainty, dread or downright fear.

Just as the business project is very different from any other assessment you have undertaken – for a start, you get to write the question, which is more of a hindrance than a help – this book recognises that it needs to be different from other textbooks too. The key differences are:

- Because everybody's project is different in terms of its content, this book is partly a workbook, for you to customise by writing things in, so that it will help you with *your* project.
- You may well have some lectures to support you in doing your project, but the chances are that for most of the time you will be working on your own. The book has been written in a deliberately 'easy access' style, because it will be your companion in the wee small hours of the night as you are hunched over your laptop, bashing away with a lot of hesitation, unable to 'ask the lecturer afterwards'.
- To make it an easy read, I've adopted a style of writing that is more like the spoken word. It's rather less dry than you may be used to in a normal textbook, and it's not a style that you should copy in your project. But I think that one of the problems with normal textbooks is that they are *too* dry. While I'm serious all the time, that doesn't mean there won't be any moments of lighter relief – nothing exactly LMFAO you understand, an uncomfortable experience in any case I would imagine, and one that I wouldn't wish on you.

It's also different from most other books covering the same subject in another very significant way. It doesn't assume you are destined to get a First with the minimum of effort, just by being naturally gifted. It assumes you are no direct threat to Bill Gates or Richard Branson just yet, but that you are a pretty regular undergraduate student, reasonably intelligent (after all, you wouldn't have got into university if you weren't), and that you want the basics of how to complete a good, if not brilliant, project. It will certainly help you do a brilliant project if there is one inside you currently struggling to get out.

Project

A self-contained piece of work. Throughout this book the word is used in the specific context of an undergraduate research project.

Maybe you are dreading doing the project. What you have to do, and how you have to do it, may seem daunting. Perhaps you feel you don't actually have a project in you trying to escape. With the help of this book, you should be able to find that project, grow it into something a lot better than half decent, and hand in something which you can genuinely feel proud of. The project will probably be the longest thing you will ever write, so give it your best shot. This book will help you do exactly that.

Two key points to remember when doing your project:

Research

A systematic process for adding to the body of knowledge through an evidence-based approach.

- Learning to do **research** is very much about learning a particular way of thinking. Doing research is about questioning why or how something has happened or happens, working out a logical way of finding the answer, gathering evidence to support an answer in a systematic way, and finally coming to a logical conclusion – the only possible answer to your original question.
- Research is rarely dramatic or earth shattering, but is about adding to the body of knowledge in even a small way. You become the first person to know something for certain, which is in its own way satisfying. It doesn't necessarily happen overnight – the researchers who invented the transistor had been working at their research for quite a few years before making the major breakthrough.

The book has been developed from twenty years of experience of supervising and supporting students in writing undergraduate business projects, Masters business dissertations, and Doctoral theses, at De Montfort University and Coventry University, and also at the University of Applied Sciences, Kufstein, Austria, where I am a Visiting Professor, and the Russian International Olympic University in Sochi, where I am an International Professor. I have a debt of gratitude to the students I've supervised and taught, who have made me think more deeply about the best way to explain everything to do with research projects. Over the years there have been the Good, the Bad, and even the Ugly, but all of them have unknowingly contributed indirectly to this book. It is to them it is dedicated.

How to Use this Book

This book is very different from the kind of book you are used to. This should not be completely surprising, as the project is very different from the kind of coursework assessments that you are used to.

What you will be used to in a piece of assessment is being asked a question or set a task by your lecturer, for which you then, typically, have to prepare an essay or a report. Because everyone has been given the same piece of assessment, everyone will produce broadly similar essays or reports. The project is essentially different – most obviously because not only do you get to choose the **topic** of the project, you *have* to choose the topic.

As a result, while every project follows the general scheme of things in doing research, each project is highly individual in its content. Someone marking projects will obviously see both strong similarities in the format of every project and also the highly individual subject matter of each individual project.

This book aims to help all of you doing a project by taking you through the common **process**, while at the same time getting you to move forward in developing your own highly personal and individual content. Throughout the book there are write-in boxes where you can apply what you have been studying to your specific project. The boxes include reflective exercises to develop your understanding and practice of research skills, and write-in tasks which will form the basis of the design for your project.

I recommend that you first read through the book once from beginning to end before you start to create your project. Don't write anything into the boxes; leave this to the second working through the book. It does no harm to think about what you might want to write into the boxes, but don't actually write anything in, and don't let the boxes and exercises distract you from getting this first broad overview of what the book is about.

This will give you a good general overview of what you will need to do in order to get your project up and running. It will provide a basis for writing a project proposal if your university requires you to hand one in. It will raise lots of questions in your mind, which might worry you a little. Don't worry! This is perfectly normal, and is a situation that everyone who has ever done a project will have faced. What you need to do is then work in a systematic way, facing these troubling questions in a particular order.

Topic

The topic of your research project is the context (in particular, the industry sector and the business function, such as marketing or finance) in which it is embedded.

Process

A systematic series of actions carried out in a particular order to achieve an ultimate goal.

How to Use this Book

As you work your way through the book you will come across certain key words. The first time they appear, they will be printed in bold, and a box explaining them will be nearby. They are all printed together in the glossary, which begins on page 163.

So, once you have completed this first 'non-stop' run through the book, you should then begin to work your way through again from the beginning, chapter by chapter, doing the exercises and filling in the boxes as you go. This will establish the basis for doing your own project.

Once you are up and running, you can return to the book as a handbook at any time. To summarise:

- First read through – read all the way through; don't stop and do the exercises or fill in the boxes.
- Second read through – read through again, chapter by chapter; do stop and do the exercises or fill in the boxes; stop and reflect as you finish each chapter; aim to start each further chapter as a new work session.
- Downloadable copies of the various checklists and templates are available free from the SAGE website at study.sagepub.com/beece
- When you find it necessary, go back and dip in to specific chapters as 'revision', or 'read ahead' out of interest.

Enjoy!

John Beech

Key to Icons

These icons are used throughout the book. Make sure you are clear what they stand for.



Stop and write in your personal answers now. You should be able to do this quickly.



Stop and be prepared to do some work away from the book. This will involve some personal reflection, and you will need to spend some time thinking.



This logo is used to draw attention to information that may not apply to every reader. You will need to think whether it applies to you.



Keep coming back to this as you progress through the production of your project.



Do one of the exercises at the back of the book designed to develop your research skills and competences.



Recommended reading. I have been careful to recommend only books that are an accessible read, and which are relatively cheap (but try your university library first!).

Remember, wherever space has been left in a box you should write your response in. In this way you will customise this workbook towards your own individual project.

SECTION 1

What Is Research?

Section guide

Before you begin to construct your own project, you need to understand what research is, what the research project is all about, and how you can start to build a high-quality research project.

In this section you will work your way through to the answers to the following questions:

1. Why is the research project important to me?
2. What will I get out of it?
3. Why do I need to know about it in the first and second years when I only get to do it in the final year?
4. What is research all about?
5. What happens if it all starts to go pear shaped?
6. How will I be able to tell if my project is any good?
7. How relevant is this project to working in the real world?

Ready then? The great adventure begins here!

1

Introduction

Chapter objectives

By completing the work in this chapter, you should be able to:

- understand the basic nature of research
- appreciate the importance and significance of your research project to you
- relate the research you will do to research undertaken in the real business world
- see a rough outline of the road ahead of you.

Introduction

Of course it's tempting to start work on your project by opening a new Word file, called Project.docx, and typing away. To be honest, that's a bit like jumping into the driving seat of a car for the first time ever and expecting to start driving off on a long journey. It isn't going to work, and pretty rapidly you'd come to the conclusion that driving is an impossible skill to acquire. The normal way to learn to drive would begin with learning something about cars and how they are actually operated through their controls, and some basic roadcraft, all well away from the steering wheel.

In this chapter, you will learn the corresponding background information for writing your project, and start to acquire the skills and competences you will need.

If you are suffering from an almost overwhelming urge to dash off a questionnaire and rush out into the street with it, pressing it onto startled and unsuspecting passers-by, resist it! It's the equivalent of heading out onto the motorway on your first ever trip driving a car.

Why is the research project important to me?

The chances are that you bought this book because you have no choice over your business project – at most universities you have to do one to get your degree, or at least to get an Honours degree. Of course, business degrees at different universities have different regulations, and for this book to work for you at your university you will need to customise it. So the very first thing for you to do is answer the following straightforward questions. If you are not already sure of the answers, ask your tutor or, better still, check out the module descriptor from your university intranet (Blackboard, Moodle or whatever).



Is the business project compulsory in my degree programme? YES / NO
 Is it essential if I want to get an Honours degree? YES / NO

Whenever you see the pencil in this book, it means you have to customise – this is what will produce your project for you.

If you answered ‘Yes’ to either or both questions, it’s clear why you will want to pass the project. But is a ‘pass’ all that you are looking for?

To answer that question with any degree of seriousness, you will need to work out how much the marks for the project count towards your final degree classification. Here there is very great variety across the project modules in different degrees at different universities, so you will need to do some basic calculations to fill in the next part.



Does your final degree classification depend only on your final year marks? (If your answer is ‘it depends because our mark is calculated in several different ways’, you will need to work through the questions for each way of calculating it. I’ve assumed below, for simplicity, that your answer is ‘yes’.)	YES / NO / IT DEPENDS
How many CATS points make up the full final year?	360
How many CATS points is the business project worth?	
What percentage of the CATS points for the final year’s marks are down to the project? (Your last answer divided by 360 and then multiplied by 100.)	

Once you've reached that answer, it should be clear that in all probability the project carries significant weighting in determining your final degree classification. A good project is, for example, enough to pull your classification up to a 2:1 from a 2:2, but, on the other hand, a poor project is enough to drag a potential 2:2 down to a Third. So, it's pretty important, and, given that it's all still to play for, you have some power to improve your classification if you put the effort into it.

Regular modules don't have the same power of affecting your classification, so why is it that the project has this special status? It all comes down to why the project is in your degree programme.

When universities design their degree programmes, they have certain benchmarks, defined by a body called the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, or QAA for short. They are not allowed to just bung any old thing into the syllabus – there are certain basics that must be there to justify the name of the degree, whether it be Business Studies, or Business Administration, or even other degrees with the word 'Management' in their name, such as Sports Management, Events Management or Tourism Management.

Degrees in business have the following requirements to meet included in the QAA Benchmark Statement for general business and management degrees:

3.9 Graduates should be able to demonstrate a range of cognitive and intellectual skills together with techniques specific to business and management. Graduates should also be able to demonstrate relevant personal and interpersonal skills. These include ...

- ability to conduct research into business and management issues, either individually or as part of a team for projects/dissertations/presentations. This requires familiarity with and an evaluative approach to a range of business **data**, sources of information and appropriate methodologies, and for such to inform the overall learning process
- self-reflection and criticality including self-awareness, openness and sensitivity to diversity in terms of people, cultures, business and management issues. Also, the skills of learning to learn and developing a continuing appetite for learning; reflective, adaptive and collaborative learning.

(Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2007)

Most universities have retained the project, which complies with this benchmark, in a format that complied with earlier versions, which specifically required a demonstration that students were capable of conducting *sustained, independent* research (my emphasis).

It is the sustained and independent elements that make the project module so different from other modules. All your other modules operate within a standard timeframe of

Data

Systematically gathered bits of information. 'Data' is actually the plural of 'datum', but most people don't use the word 'datum' any more.