

DBA Research Proposal Guidance

About this document: *A preliminary stage of your doctoral studies is the application stage for which you are required to produce a document providing information about your research interest, but also structured according to well defined scientific criteria. Good research starts with good questions we can ask ourselves in order to guide our thought processes in a structured manner and to build the foundation of your future research activities and being successful with your application. Therefore this document is provided to help you consider the research topic that you identify and whether it meets the needs of the programme, but also how to submit your research proposal once you have identified a suitable topic.*

In order to begin your DBA programme, as part of your application, you need to provide an outline of the focus of your proposed research. Your choice of research topic, which you identify at this stage, will influence and guide you throughout your whole DBA programme. What you identify now as the core of your research work will heavily influence both your study experience but also the outcome at the end of the programme.

What makes a good topic?

There are several factors that need to be met in order for you to decide whether your chosen topic has the potential to form the core of a successful DBA. Below we will go through each of these factors and decide whether your identified topic meets the requirements or needs further adjustment to better meet them.

Factor 1 – Business Management Research

Business Management research has at its heart the need to advance knowledge by addressing practical business and managerial issues. The end result of the research should be the ability to empower action for the stakeholders connected with the research, be it a

specific organisation, group of practitioners or others. Therefore the first question you should ask of your identified topic is the following:

Will my research provide practical guidance on which action can be taken?

Factor 2 – Making a Theoretical Contribution

Research is only done when there is a clear need for it, both from a practical perspective as outlined above, but also from a theoretical perspective. The outcome of your research should be that it also enriches our understanding of an area(s), contributing to greater understanding of a field or specific set of issues that exist within the business sphere. Therefore, the second question you should ask of your identified topic is the following?

Will my research enhance our understanding of a specific issue or make a contribution to greater understanding within an academic field?

Factor 3 – Personal Interest and Motivation

The research topic that you apply with will form the core of the work throughout your studies on the DBA programme. You are being accepted onto the programme based on the specifics of the topic you identify, which means that you will only be able to modify the aim later, but not to choose a new topic or field. Therefore, as this topic will form your work, you must have a genuine interest in it to sustain you throughout the whole study process. Motivation in a topic can come from multiple areas, such as the professional benefit you may gain, or a genuine desire to learn about something, or that you want to enact action on the basis of your work in the future. Whatever it is, it must be genuine.

Therefore, the third question you should ask of your identified research topic is the following:

Do I have a genuine motivation and interest in the work to sustain me throughout the programme?

Factor 4 – Feasibility

Notice that our enthusiasm for a research topic can be a double-edged sword, affording us motivation and a desire to investigate the research topic and propose recommendations for change, but at the same time unless we are realistic about our ability to conduct the research, be able to connect to the people who will provide us with the necessary primary data (data directly gathered by us), then we will be unlikely to successfully complete it. Therefore it is crucial at this early stage to identify who we will need to connect with in order to complete the work and assess whether this will be feasible or not. It is better to consider this now, before any commitments have been made, than have issues with data collection at a later stage and be unable to complete the work. Therefore, the fourth question you should ask of your identified topic is the following:

Who will I need to collect data from, is that going to be possible/feasible?

Stating your Topic

If the topic you have identified meets the criteria above it is important to have clarity on what it is and what you hope to achieve. By stating it in one sentence, it allows you to see what you propose in concrete terms to assess its potential as a topic and focus for your DBA studies. Good practice here is to include the following elements in your topic statement:

- The issue which you want to address;

- The location where you plan to do the investigation (could be geographic, could be industry, could be company);
- The outcome you have in mind (not the exact answer, but the type of things you would like to have).

In your statement try and be as precise as possible on what you wish to examine and what the outcome will be. The greater the level of precision you have at this stage, the easier you will find it to be able to make the case for the investigation.

Identifying the Issue

If your intended research topic meets the criteria already outlined previously, then it is necessary to begin creating the 'rationale' for your research, in essence arguing why it is necessary. We can begin to do this by identifying three issues:

1) **General Issue** – what is the larger issue in which your proposed research falls?

For example, if the emphasis of my proposed research was on examining the obstacles faced by growing small businesses, I could begin with a discussion of the importance of smaller businesses to economic development, then focus more on the issue of why many small businesses fail, providing evidence around the proportion of small businesses which fail, some of the reasons why this might happen.

2) **Specific Focus** – where is the focus of the proposed study? Why does it need to be done?

Once I have stated what the larger issue is, you might then begin to argue why the investigation needs to be done in the location you have identified. For example you could talk about the importance of small businesses to developing depressed areas, their role in employment, again, providing evidence for the claims you have made. To continue the

theme identified in the general issue, you could also then show through statistics and example what the situation is in your identified area.

3) **Specific Issue** – what exactly will you examine and why does it need to be done?

At this stage of the process, you would then clearly identify the issue you feel needs examination and make an argument as to its need and contribution. For example, using the approach outlined above, you could argue that a key issue in smaller businesses is that of professionalisation, delegation of authority from company owners allowing for growth. Here you could bring in prior research, which highlights that this might be an issue. You could then finish the argument by arguing that if specific proposals and guidance could be made, smaller businesses could avoid some of the pitfalls they may currently face, creating a healthier business environment in your identified location.

By examining these issues at this point, you will be able to see whether there is validity in your claims that the work is necessary. If you are unable to form a convincing argument at this point, perhaps you need to revisit your intended topic and make adjustments. The way to look at this exercise is to examine it from a practical perspective, use the practical reasons behind your research as the basis of the argument and whether an argument can be made or not.

Ask yourself the following question:

What real problems might your work actually solve?

Creating a Provisional Project Aim

If the topic we have identified meets the four criteria above then we should then move to the next step, which is formulating a provisional aim. The purpose of this is twofold. Firstly it will provide you with initial direction in terms of identifying relevant literature and proposed

methods. Secondly, by formulating the research objectives it will provide you with clarity on the steps that you will need to take to complete the research by achieving your aim.

When designing a research aim, make sure it contains the following elements:

1 – Command verb – this is a verb encapsulating what it is that you are trying to achieve.

For example:

- To investigate: discover and examine something
- To understand: perceive meaning from stated opinions and actions
- To determine: the causes or relationships between elements/variables
- To explore: what perceptions and reactions people have to something
- To evaluate: assess the feasibility of something, whether it has support

2 – Express the intent of the research – what is it that you are examining or researching?

3 – Include a focus for where the research will be conducted – is the research to be conducted in a geographic area, an industry location, a specific segment of the market?

4 – Provide an overriding purpose for the research – state what the outcome of the research should be.

By putting this together the end result may be something like the following:

“To investigate SME owners attitudes and processes for identifying employees for promotion to managerial level roles in the Tees Valley in order to generate a best practice guide for developing effective HR processes within smaller businesses.”

Once you have done this you should then focus on formulating a set of research objectives. Whilst they are expressed in the same format as your aim, their purpose is to state the steps you need to take in order to achieve the overall research aim.

Typically we would formulate four objectives covering different areas of the research process (notice that the number of research objectives is not fixed and may vary depending on the complexity of the research topic and its demand):

1 – Exploring the literature and identifying gaps (explore the previous research, from 5 to 10 years old publications depending on the availability in the field, and also consider that part of it will be forming the secondary data, data collected by other researchers, for your future research development)

2 and 3 – Gathering the primary data necessary for our research (these focus on how you as a researcher will be collecting data relevant for your research aim; you may start to think about having interviews with your candidates or running questionnaires)

4 – Providing conclusions and making recommendations (this would be where from your data analysis you would provide conclusions for your stakeholders and possibly recommendations)

Each objective should be expressed clearly and also include its purpose, as in how it helps achieve the overall aim of your proposed project. So for the example the aim stated above we might formulate the following research objectives:

Objective 1: To explore the literature in the fields of human resources, management in SMEs and barriers to growth in order to identify potential issues with smaller business career progression.

Objective 2: To understand owner attitudes to delegation of authority and professionalisation of management in smaller businesses in the Teesside valley.

Objective 3: To determine the processes used in smaller businesses to identify potential employees for promotion in the Teesside valley.

Objective 4: To draw conclusions and make recommendations as to how smaller businesses can enhance the career progression of their employees and delegate authority to their managers.

In this specific example the Objective 2 and 3 could be met by interviewing owners and managers in the SMEs of the selected group.

Examining the Literature

Once we have created our provisional aim, and formulated the research objectives, it is then necessary to examine the current literature on our topic, in order to show how our research fits into the field, how it will complement what is already known by filling in a gap within the field. The most appropriate way to do this, is to first examine the fields, which are connected to your proposed aim. If we use the aim formulated above as an example, which was provided previously then we can note several connected fields that can be at least three different areas of research where to collect resources about previous research:

- Human Resources
- Management
- Small business growth

Therefore we would begin our “keyword search” for research conducted into these areas (normally we would examine publications within the last 5 to 10 years). From the papers that you find, you would note the major research areas and findings, linking them to your

research, identifying similar studies, which may have been conducted. With each paper that you identify, consider how the findings may relate to your topic area or not, what does current knowledge say about the subject which forms the core of your research.

However, you should go beyond looking for similarities. The key here is to also recognise those areas which may not have received a great deal of attention or are in need of contemporary investigation, particularly in how they relate to your proposed investigation, in essence this becomes the 'research gap' you need to identify.

When identifying that there is a gap in the literature, try to write down how your proposed research will begin to fill in this gap as this will allow you to make a stronger case for your research, particularly the need for it. We must always remember that our research must have a clear need and contribution, both from an academic and practice point of view.

Identifying your Methods

If you have been able to make the case for your research to be done, both from a practical and academic point of view, then the next element to consider is how you propose to actually investigate your topic area. For the DBA, your research should be primarily based on the collection of primary data (new data collected by you) in order to add to our understanding of the topic and increase knowledge in the academic fields where our research belongs. At this point you should start to consider the following:

- Who do I need to collect data from?
- What shared criteria do these people have?
- Where can these people be found?
- What type of information do I need to collect from them? (Is this information quantitative, and measurable somehow or is qualitative based on descriptions and linguistic elements?)
- What will I do with the data once it has been collected? (How will I analyse it?)

But again, we should not get too carried away by our enthusiasm for the topic. We should also consider before going any further the following questions:

- Is it feasible for me to get access to these people?
- Do I need permission from specific organisations in order to collect data and gain access to the individuals for my study?
- Are potential cooperating organisations aware that I wish to work with them?
- Have I already explored potential cooperation with them?

If not, before you go any further with your research proposal you need to contact these cooperating parties to gain initial agreement and assess the feasibility of your research, otherwise you may find your plan for data collection being ineffective if they decide later not to cooperate with you. This is particularly relevant for your research proposal as if you specify that you are planning to work within a specific organisation or have access to specific people, you will be asked whether you have agreement or not. Your project will seem less convincing if you cannot answer this in the affirmative.

Identifying the Potential Contribution

Once you have thought about the above exercises and whether your topic meets the criteria and it is clear in terms of what it aims to achieve and how it will be investigated, the next step is to define exactly what the expected outcomes of the project will be.

Contribution to Knowledge: By the end of the project, what will you have added to our understanding of the related academic areas connected to your topic? Will you have been able to come up with new approaches, have you added to existing models and approaches?

Contribution to Practice: By the end of your investigation, what advice, guidance or recommendations, will you be able to make which enhances organisational practice in some way?

Thinking about these two contributions at this point allows you to again assess whether the topic and investigation you are proposing has merit and meets the requirements of business management research in terms of making positive increases in both knowledge and future action. If you are not able to make this argument, then it probably indicates that in its current form, your proposed investigation needs revision until these outcomes become clearer.

Research Proposal Checklist

Before you begin the actual writing of your research proposal, it is important that you pause and ensure that you are able to answer the following questions. Only if the answer is positive, should you progress to the next section which details how your should be written.

- Will my research provide practical guidance on which action can be taken?

- Will my research enhance our understanding of a specific issue or make a contribution to greater understanding within an academic field?
- Do I have a genuine motivation and interest in the work to sustain me throughout the programme?
- Who will I need to collect data from, is that going to be possible/feasible?
- Can I make the argument as to why my research is necessary?
- Can I identify a research gap in the literature?
- Are my proposed methods feasible?
- Can I access the people I have identified?
- Do I have necessary permissions to conduct the research within organisations (if applicable)?
- Can I argue that my research will make a contribution to knowledge and practice?

Writing up your Research Proposal

Please use the research proposal template provided and upload your completed research proposal to your application before you submit this.