Lecture 01: Key Factors Affecting Research Topic Selection

1. What is Research?

The word 'research' is composed of two syllables, 're' and 'search'. The dictionary defines the former as a prefix meaning again, a new or over again and the latter as a verb meaning to examine closely and carefully, to test and try, or to probe. Together, they form a noun describing a careful, systematic, patient study and investigation in some field of knowledge, undertaken to establish facts or principles. **(Grinnell, 1993)**

Grinnell further adds: 'research is a structured inquiry that utilises acceptable scientific methodology to solve problems and creates new knowledge that is generally applicable.' **(1993)**

Lundberg (1942) draws a parallel between the social research process, which is considered scientific, and the process that we use in our daily lives. According to him: Scientific methods consist of systematic observation, classification and interpretation of data.

Now obviously, this process is one in which nearly all people engage in the course of their daily lives. The main difference between our day-to-day generalisations and the conclusions usually recognised as scientific method lies in the degree of formality, rigorousness, verifiability and general validity of the latter. **(Lundberg, 1942)**

Burns (1997) defines research as 'a systematic investigation to find answers to a problem'.

According to **Kerlinger (1986)**, 'scientific research is a systematic, controlled empirical and critical investigation of propositions about the presumed relationships about various phenomena'.

Bulmer (1977) states: 'Nevertheless sociological research, as research, is primarily committed to establishing systematic, reliable and valid knowledge about the social world.'

2. What is a Research Problem?

Broadly speaking, any question that you want answered and any assumption or assertion that you want to challenge or investigate can become a research problem or a research topic for your study. However, it is important to remember that not all questions can be transformed into research problems and some may prove

to be extremely difficult to study. According to **Powers, Meenaghan and Twoomey (1985)**, 'Potential research questions may occur to us on a regular basis, but the process of formulating them in a meaningful way is not at all an easy task.' As a newcomer, it might seem easy to formulate a problem but it requires considerable knowledge of both the subject area and research methodology.

3. Key Factors Affecting Research Topic Selection

The research problem undertaken for study must be carefully selected. There is a set of factors that need to be considered in selecting a research topic.

3.1 Relevance and Familiarity

Select a topic that is of relevance to you as a professional. Ensure that your study adds to the existing body of knowledge, bridges current gaps or is useful in policy formulation. This will help you to sustain interest in the study. In addition, the researcher's prior knowledge and expertise are crucial when starting a new project. While the journey of seeking knowledge begins with asking questions about unknowns, prior knowledge about the field is necessary to design new research. In other words, having adequate information about a field helps a researcher determines research gaps. For instance, presenting or participating in any conference relevant to the subject area serves as one of the best sources to select a topic for research. Similarly, reading research papers in the relevant field serves as illuminating factors to identify the idea of research **(Todd, 2004).** Sometimes, for the professionals, day-to-day classroom observations and experiences serve as a source for the selection of a research topic. **(Celia, 2008).**

3.2 Interest

Interest should be the most important consideration in selecting a research problem. A research endeavour is usually time consuming, and involves hard work and possibly unforeseen problems. If you select a topic which does not greatly interest you, it could become extremely difficult to sustain the required motivation and put in enough time and energy to complete it

3.3 Supervisors' Availability

The candidate has to identify a supervisor whose main role is to guide through the dissertation process. Actually, every student has a supervisor from the same department. If students accept a topic suggested by their faculty supervisors, life can be more comfortable because students have their supervisors' direct support

and can save a tremendous amount of time searching for an ideal topic. In case they intend to select the topic themselves, the topic has to be compatible with their supervisors' research areas. The closer students' research is to their supervisors' specialty area, the more likely their advice is to be helpful to students.

3.4 Research Scope (Narrowing Down the Broad Topic to a Specific Topic)

When the scope of a topic is too broad or too narrow, it will be difficult to conduct research. If the topic is too broad, the researcher will end up writing only in general and is unlikely to go deeper into the problem due to the limitations of time and resources. If the topic is too narrow, it becomes difficult to find adequate literature that is necessary to describe the background of the study and to identify a research gap. It is necessary to narrow down the broad topic to a specific topic that is suitable for research.

3.5 Time, Cost, and Approachability of the sample

The size or the extent of the research is an aspect that has to be carefully minded. One does not want to pursue an endeavour that he/she cannot finish simply. Thinking of the magnitude of the research has to start from the question asked. A researcher has to make sure that he /she has sufficient knowledge about the topic. Sometimes, even with the required information to answer the question, time becomes a hindering factor. Thus, the time allocated for the research has to be considered. Furthermore, there are resources that have to be included in planning such as financial ones and permissions required to enter places and having access to certain individuals.

3.6 Novelty and Duplication Avoidance

Investigate whether the topic has been researched. If the topic has been researched, the results should be reviewed to explore whether major questions that deserve further investigation remain unanswered. If not, another topic should be chosen.

3.7 Resources Availability and Accessibility

Research is all about collecting data to answer particular questions. Therefore, it is crucial for a researcher to ensure the availability of data. First, information can come from primary sources such as events, records, unpublished or published documents, interviews, surveys, and observation. Data comes from secondary sources such as books and articles. Often, those are used as a starting point for a literature review. Furthermore, even the process of collecting data may require a different type of knowledge such as the use of specific

machinery without which experiments cannot function. Thus, all these have to be considered before starting an inquiry.

3.8 Ethical Acceptance

Collecting and obtaining knowledge also involve ethical issues and considerations that go beyond the ethics of conducting the research itself. Before starting any research, one has to guarantee the legality of the work as any scientific endeavour has to adhere to the regulations of the scientific institution and the government "Code of Conduct". Second, human subjects' protection has to be considered and taken into account. On this, often asking questions can involve information that might endanger informants. Therefore, respect for human dignity, privacy, and autonomy have to be of utmost importance. The researcher also has a social responsibility towards his / her community by mitigating social harms through research, public education, and advocacy.

According to **Saunders, 2009, Hulley et al, 2013, Wang and Park, 2016**, the following codes of ethics have to be taken into account:

- Necessary approval for all studies that involve humans from the competent authority.
- Necessary approval for clinical trials of drugs from the competent authority.
- Any risk of harming people, the environment, or property.
- Privacy and confidentiality.
- Society's cultural, moral, religious and legal values.
- Honesty and integrity in conducting research.