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What Characterize Good Business Research

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Abstract

This paper touches on the importance of research as a performance indicator in universities. From the evaluation of research work in the literature as well as examiners' reports, the authors identified some important points which may help to improve undergraduate and postgraduate students in doing better business research. The contributions made towards that end are on the scope and purpose of research, literature review, research design, interpretation and discussion of data findings, and lastly summarizing the content of research.

Key Words: clearly defined, sufficient literature, thorough planning

Introduction

Substantial investments have been made to improve the quantity and quality of university research since some 50 years ago (Gordon & Howell, 1959). Nevertheless, research in universities has come under attack recently (Hitt & Geer, 2012) on two main grounds. (1) While concentrating on research, professors do not teach enough classes; thus leading to increase in the cost of higher education. (2) Many of the research done are on topics of low value (Trowbridge, 2011; Vedder, 2010, 2011).

Hitt and Greer (2012) contend that academic research provides the knowledge for areas like strategic management, may lead to future applied research, and increases the content for courses. Most faculties of business schools would agree that improving the quality of research done is important for the legitimacy of their research work.

Postgraduate students have also not been spared from the need to do better research; they are required to submit quality theses for graduation and in the process publish some good papers in higher ranked journals.

From work done on the evaluation of research — including examiners' reports — the authors have identified some points that may help undergraduate and postgraduate students to do better business research.

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Scope and purpose clearly defined

Let's look at how researchers construct their research objectives: main and specific. Researchers need to be alert to the symptom of an organization's problem and then develop a clear statement of, and rationale for, the research objective/question/aims/purposes (Walsh & Downe, 2006). Two examples are shown below.

Example 1

A researcher noticed that companies were investing heavily on advertising; but how much the advertisement could influence consumers' perception of an advertiser was less known. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to conduct research to examine how a sponsor's advocacy advertising program influences the image of the sponsor.

For the context of the study, researchers should review past theoretical models that studied the aforementioned research problem. Past studies shows that audiences would evaluate the following three factors in order to determine the credibility of the advertisements: *trustworthiness, expertise,* and *attractiveness.*

Therefore, the main objective of the research could be set as follows: To examine whether advocacy advertisement influences consumers' perception of the advertiser. Specifically, this research intends to study (1) the relationships or correlations of those variables (namely, *trustworthiness, expertise,* and *attractiveness*) used by consumers to describe the effectiveness of the advocacy advertisement in building corporate image, and (2) the relative strength of each variable (i.e., *trustworthiness/expertise/attractiveness*) in influencing consumers' attitude of the advertiser.

Example 2

This example is a descriptive study that aims to measure the economic impact of tourism in a study region. Tourism is a big business in many countries, and a state government has been concentrating on increasing the tourist arrivals; but how much economic benefit can be generated to the local community is less known. Therefore, the research purpose or general objective of this research would be to estimate the economic contributions — for example, generation of additional product sales and employment — of tourist expenditure on the tourism sector in the study region.

Specifically, this study intends to (1) Estimate the direct economic impact of tourist expenditure; i.e. how much money had been spent by tourists in the region? (2) Estimate the indirect impact of tourist spending in the local economy; i.e. how much of the money earned by region's tourism sectors had been used to purchase inputs from other companies located inside (as opposed to from outside) the study region? (3) Provide policy implications and recommendations to the state government.

Researchers need to ensure that their research objectives are in line with the given problem statement.

Literature sufficiently reviewed

Students often experience tension when determining the extent they have to search and establish the current state of knowledge about the topic before undertaking primary data collection and analysis.

Business research should be comprehensive in its incorporation of existing literature so as to provide a context for the findings. The authors suggest an analysis of the literature as follows. Firstly, do a general review of past empirical research of your study area. Find out the past research trends, for example: Were the past studies concentrated only on a category of product? Were the research conducted in the same study region? Were their research findings similar or contradicting? What were the most recommended future research areas suggested by the literature? The outcome of these analyses can guide the researchers on the justifications for conducting their research area and of their research contributions.

Secondly, an overview of past theoretical/conceptual models, or modeling frameworks in the case of descriptive studies, should be carried out. An examination of relationships between variables used in past studies will guide the construction of the researcher's theoretical or conceptual model. Suppose literature showed that several models had been suggested for measuring the economic impact of tourism. Segregate the discussions of past models into sub-topics, e.g. 2.2.1 Economic Base Model, 2.2.2 Input-Output Model, 2.2.3 Tourism Satellite Account Model, and 2.2.4 Computable General Equilibrium Model. Provide brief information of the past models such as Who constructed the model? When it was introduced? What were the purposes of constructing the model? and discuss the modifications done by past researchers. Then, compare the past models' advantages and disadvantages. Analyze the applicability of the models in the present research. Provide a brief statement of modifications that need to be undertaken to lessen the weaknesses of the selected model.

Thirdly, the historical developments of the theoretical framework of the selected model should be included, including how and why past researchers modified the initial model. Proceed to show the conceptual framework of the selected model. Explain the definition, relationships, and attributes or measurements of the variables involved. Find out the theoretical assumptions of the selected model and how past researchers relaxed some unrealistic assumptions.

Reviewing the past studies' data collection design — including the sampling framework (or population data), respondents, data collected using quantitative and qualitative approaches, research tools used, and the sampling technique — is a useful step. By reviewing the validity and reliability of past data, the researcher can anticipate the problems that may arise if the design is replicated.

The next step involves an overview of past studies' data analytical techniques. Find out the trend of analytical techniques used by past researchers — how past researchers modified the technique; what new techniques were suggested. It is the present researcher's duty to analyze which technique (initial, modified or new) is best for his or her current research data.

Finally, end the literature review chapter by summarizing the similarities, differences, and weaknesses of past studies. It is wise to suggest ways to lessen the anticipated problems which had been encountered by past studies.

Detailed review or analysis of literature is imperative to provide guidelines to present researchers in choosing the best conceptual or modeling framework, methodology, and analytical technique for their studies.

It is not advisable to deliver the review of literature via the use of overtly (obviously/explicitly), extensive, and lengthy quotations. Citation or quotation of the literature should be accompanied by the present researcher's further elaboration or explication. Literature review includes appraising the sources with critical thinking skills. It is also the present researcher's job to properly link all sources to the body of his or her current research.

Research design thoroughly planned

The procedural design and methodology of the research should be clearly described and carefully planned to yield results that are close to reality or truth. The rationale for choosing a research method, whether quantitative, qualitative or both approaches should be discussed.

The research process used such as data collection steps should be described in sufficient detail so as to permit another researcher to repeat the research. Analysis of data must be transparent and rigorous, and this may be proven by the explicit acknowledgment of the existence of deviant or dissonant data (Walsh and Downe, 2006).

A good researcher should anticipate the limitations of the chosen methodology by reviewing its disadvantages and weaknesses. Copying the published limitations of chosen methods as limitations of the current research is strongly discouraged. Suggesting ways to lessen the problems anticipated in current research should be done. For example, published data are not suitable for the analysis of tourism's economic impact because these data do not segregate the money earned from tourists and local residents. Therefore, two surveys should be undertaken: (1) Questionnaires should be distributed to estimate the tourist respondents' spending that accrues to the host community. (2) On top of the distribution of questionnaires to selected tourism establishments, the observation method should also be employed to cross-check the tourist count provided by the tourism establishment respondents.

There are very few perfect research designs. Some of the imperfections may have little effect on the validity and reliability of the data. The researcher should report, with complete frankness, flaws in procedural design and estimate their effect on the findings. Limitations or weaknesses of the present study should be clearly outlined; and directions for further investigation given.

Researchers need to be transparent in the recording of dilemmas in ethical issues met and resolved in past studies. They should also develop and suggest solutions for ethical issues that could arise in the current research.

Interpreting and discussing data findings

The meaning of the collected information together with determined conclusions, significance, and implications of the findings are to be provided. This is called the data interpretation process. The appropriate perspective needs to be adopted when interpreting the analyzed data.

It is important that analysis and interpretation of a study be related back to the study's objectives. It is usual to use descriptive analysis first to get a "feel" of the data. According to Walsh and Downe (2006), there should be evidence that the researcher spent time 'dwelling with the data', interrogating it for competing/alternative explanations of phenomena. Data findings should be comprehensively interpreted, easily understood by the decision maker, and so organized that he or she can readily locate critical findings. Simply writing the data analysis statistical results does not constitute research, nor do they comprise an interpretation of data findings.

Researchers need to state the implications of data findings. They must be able to derive benefits from them. For example, a significant relationship has been found to exist between tourists' expenditure per person and the tourists' country of residence. Comparatively, westerners are willing to spend more in the region's economy. Such spending habits can be due to their preference for enjoying long holidays in the study's region; for instance, all respondents who stay more than 20 nights are western tourists. This finding corroborates the government's decision to promote "My Second Home" program in western countries — to encourage foreigners to buy houses in Malaysia for their own extended length of stay.

Researchers tend to decrease the objectivity and validity of their research by including their personal experience or their own interpretations, relying too heavily on secondary data, or drawing conclusions from a study with an unrepresentative sample.

Finally, research empirical findings should be compared to findings in the literature. How the results fit into the existing or current body of knowledge needs to be mentioned.

Summarizing the content of research

The write up of the research ends with this part as the conclusion chapter. Under this chapter, the research purpose and objectives need to be restated. Then, the research findings should be summarized. It is important to provide the significance of the study. Make comments on whether the research's objectives and contributions were achieved. Implications of the research findings should be given for the benefits of academic scholars, business and government decision makers. Limitations of current research should be revealed frankly. Based on the limitations, researchers can suggest ideas for consideration in future research. The significance of research findings for current policy and practice should be outlined. Any new insights and increases in understanding should also be provided (Walsh and Downe, 2006).

The authors hope that this paper can provide some contributions to the trend of better business research.

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