

Finding a Research Topic

Once you have selected your research topic can you begin to work on actually doing your research. However . . .

It is important to note that the purpose of the Research Report in the MBA programme is to teach you how to identify and solve a problem / issue in the business environment. It is not primarily about the topic – the topic simply gives you a subject to work with.

The Research methodology course is designed to support you through the process of, firstly writing your Research Proposal (essentially your research plan), assisting you to get through the panel (a quality assurance and ethics check), then point you in the right direction to conduct your own research, write it up to completion and finally see you graduate.

You can find research topics from, amongst other sources, the following places:

1. Existing Research Reports – the final Chapter in the Research Report is “Conclusions and Recommendations”. The recommendations are a) to those who have an interest in or may be affected by the research and b) Recommendations for future research.
2. The application of an existing theory in a different setting or a different context. Much published research (eg in Journal articles) relates to overseas situations – what would that research find if carried out in South Africa?
3. An investigation into whether a particular early theory (eg about strategy, leadership, customer relations, diversity management, the financial markets, globalisation, economic theory etc etc) still applies today.
4. A replication study (choose a **good** study to replicate if you do this) of previous research in a different setting, context or time-frame, eg in a different market sector, or after democracy in South Africa.
5. The exploration of a gap or contradiction in existing theory / research.
6. The exploration of any links between two or more different ideas or concepts, eg what are the effects of teaching style and class size on MBA graduate competence?
7. An exploration of factors affecting a certain situation, eg identification of the factors promoting the success of small businesses in South Africa.
8. The application of an important concept or theory in a particular context, eg how does the intervention of an NGO affect the economic survival of a particular rural community (this approach goes into a great deal of depth within that particular situation).
9. Identifying what you DON'T know about a business problem or issue you are facing.

10. Any contemporary or emerging issue in your area of interest, eg as reported in the press or journals such as The Economist or The Financial Times.
11. Ask a potential supervisor or academic in your area of interest about topics they are researching and perhaps take a portion of that.
12. Ask your business colleagues, your manager or someone senior in your organisation, your customers, suppliers or other stakeholders for ideas.

When thinking about your topic, consider whether you intend to find out about **actual** events (eg by observation of people in a particular situation, by analysing actual share performance of organisations, by analysing actual bank loan applications – or whether you will be finding out about **perceptions** of events or things, eg asking people their opinions about something, or asking how they do something (compared to getting them to show you how they do it).

Some points about topics for research:

1. Topics should **not** have yes/no answers.
2. Topics should **not** have obvious answers.
3. When choosing a topic, it should not matter to you what you find out – you must be unbiased and not **expect** a particular finding – you may be wrong and will need to explain your results.
4. Your topic should be do-able in the time available, so the scope needs to be carefully defined – not too big and not too small.
5. Your topic should add at least some value / new knowledge to what is already known.
6. Your topic should have a basis in business or management.
7. Your topic should be something you can get excited about, or at least are interested in.