Frequently asked questions

1. What do I do once I've decided on a topic?

Once you've specified your research question and it reflects a precise, realistic project, it's time to think about your research strategy in more detail. Your research strategy will guide you through each of the stages of your project:

- planning
- a literature search
- the research hypothesis
- a literature review
- research design or methodology
- collecting, collating and analysing data
- drawing conclusions
- writing up.

Think about how you will perform each of these tasks. Which is the best way to approach them whilst striving for consistency and accuracy? How will you collect data, how will you present it? How will you ensure that you are responding to your research question at each step of the way? Once you are confident about answering these questions your research strategy will be ready to put into practice.

2. There's heaps of literature on my topic, how do I know what's relevant?

Treat your literature search as a chance to do some broad research into what's out there. Put aside some time for browsing in library and online catalogues. Don't worry about getting too involved with any one source. Instead, get a feel for what's been written on your topic and make a note of anything that could be useful. As you progress, start to prioritise those materials that are the most relevant and have been influential within your chosen area of research.

When you come to do your literature review, you may still be faced with a large selection of material to consider. Now is the time to look at how individual pieces of research relate to each other and how they 'lead up' to your topic. It's probably best to ignore pieces of research that don't fit into one of these 'chains'. Be critical: evaluate how important each piece of research is to your project and narrow this list down to the key 5–10 pieces of research that have had the biggest impact on your topic.

3. How can I persuade people to take part in my research?

It's possible that you'll find it difficult to get people to engage in your research generally, or you may find that one demographic is more likely to engage than another. For example, part-time students who also work and support dependants may have less opportunity to participate than a student who has a lot of freedom to organise their own time.

Think about whether you're proposing to conduct the interviews in a time and location that works for the people you hope to interview. Be aware that the way in which you find and select candidates for interview will affect the results and will have to be considered as part of your methodology.

4. I'm not getting useful answers in my interviews, what can I do?

Are your interviewees comfortable and relaxed? They are more likely to be open and honest in their answers if they know what the research is for, how long it will take and what will be expected of them. Be careful not to intimidate your subject, sit at right angles to them and use eye contact to show them that you are engaged and listening. Be aware that your body language or tone of voice and passing comments also influence their willingness to respond.

It may be that, however carefully you have designed your questions, they aren't able to capture exactly what is going on. No methodology is perfect, and an important part of research is the process of improving and refining our methods from project to project. Consider whether your questions are too open, resulting in answers that can't easily be drawn into trends. Or are they too closed, failing to capture the subtleties?

Be wary of changing your questions halfway through the research unless you are prepared to start again, as this will mean you have two incompatible sets of data. If there are limitations to your research methodology, this will be something to discuss honestly in your report, and you may wish to suggest improvements for further research.

5. My results don't seem to prove things one way or the other, should I be worried?

It is not uncommon for research projects to be inconclusive in their findings so don't worry if that is also true for your project. However, the crucial thing is to be aware of the limitations of your research and to take this into account when analysing your results. It could be that the accuracy of your results would be improved by using a larger sample or that you need to measure the results over

a longer timeframe. Even large-scale, professional researchers have to work within limitations of time, resource and expertise. Refining your methodology and acknowledging the limitations of your research are important parts of the process.

If you've put some time and consideration into designing your research methodology and have discussed this with your supervisor, your project is likely to be worthwhile, whatever the results, within the context of your studies.