

Research Methods

Lecture Title: Why Research Matters in HRM

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**Masters in
Human Resources Management**

Purpose of the Course

- Supports your research project or dissertation
- Research may be organisation-based or data-driven
- Helps you produce high-quality HR research



Key Research Skills Content

- Designing a research project
- Collecting and analysing data
- Drawing conclusions to inform HR practice



Why Research Skills Matter

- Research is a professional investment
- Builds confidence and capability in HR roles
- Employers value evidence-based decision-making



Making a Real Impact

- Benefits you, your organisation and the HR community
- Topics like engagement, inclusion and training matter
- Your work can drive meaningful change



Research as a Powerful Tool

- Research helps us ask better questions, find clearer answers and make smarter decisions.
- Your journey in Malta prepares you to be thoughtful, analytical and effective in HR—anywhere in the world.



Lecture Outline

- Researching HR issues
- Getting started
- What is research in HR?
- What kind of a researcher are you?
- Requirements for student projects
- Writing your research proposal
- Key stakeholders and sources of support during your project
- Working as a practitioner-researcher



HR Research Methods in a Post-Pandemic Context

- Covid-19 caused major changes in business and HR
- Job losses and social distancing changed how organisations operate
- These shifts affect your choice of research topic
- Consider new ways of working: remote work, wellbeing, digital tools
- Your research methods may also change (e.g. online surveys, virtual interviews)
- Aim to explore how HR can adapt and improve in today's world



Activity 1.1

The post-Covid-19 era and the HRM research agenda

- Take a few minutes to jot down, or brainstorm with other colleagues or students, how Covid-19 has affected HRM and HRD in organisations with which you are familiar.
- Come up with a list of three or four priority HRM or HRD research areas that might now be important in a post-Covid-19 context.
- In what ways might Covid-19 have impacted on sources of information available for research projects?



HRM Research in the Post-Covid-19 Era

- **Remote & Hybrid Work:** Shift in how teams collaborate and communicate
- **Employee Wellbeing:** Greater focus on mental health and flexible working
- **Digital Transformation:** Online recruitment, training, and performance management
- **Research Methods:** Increased use of online surveys and virtual interviews
- **Data Access:** Changes in availability and format of organisational data



Research Project Pathway (Masters Level)

- Start with an idea or broad interest
- Refine into a clear research question
- Develop a structured proposal (what + how)
- Carry out data collection and analysis
- Write dissertation/report
- Aim: create impact → organisational value + HR knowledge contribution



Planning Your Research Project

- Research proposals take longer than expected — plan early
- Projects compete with other academic and personal demands
- Different stages require different tools and approaches
- This module supports:
 - Proposal development
 - Secondary/literature-based research
 - Primary data research (e.g. interviews, surveys, observation)



Activity 1.2 – Making a Critical Decision

- Starting studies = major decision (time, cost, balance)
- Push factors: career change, promotion, professional growth
- Key questions:
 - Can I manage study with work/life?
 - Is the investment worth it?
 - What outcomes do I want?
- Influences: advice from family, colleagues, mentors
- Decision factors: where to study, mode of study, long-term goals



Activity 1.2 –

Key Study Decisions

- Admission requirements
- Costs and funding options
- Centres with professional accreditation
- Programme duration and time commitment
- Attendance: in-person or online delivery
- Success rates and career outcomes
- Feedback from past students

Information Sources

- Rankings and performance indicators
- Institution websites
- Conversations with current students or alumni



The Research Process

- A personal research activity
- Involves systematic enquiry into an issue
- Aims to increase knowledge and support decision-making
- Reflects core components of any research process
 - Identifying a question or issue
 - Gathering and evaluating information
 - Drawing conclusions to inform action



Components of the research process

- 1. Identify a suitable HR issue
↓
- 2. Refine the issue into a researchable topic
↓
- 3. Identify key research questions and learning objectives
↓
- 4. Review existing research in this area (literature review)
↓
- 5. Plan your research approach and data sources
↓
- 6. Collect and analyse your data
↓
- 7. Form evidence-based conclusions and recommendations

Skills of an effective researcher

Intellectual & Thinking Skills

- Know your topic well
- Learn independently
- Ask deep, critical questions
- Justify your own thinking



Skills of an effective researcher

Personal Effectiveness Skills

- Time and stress management
- Data collection skills
- Managing relationships in digital settings



Organisational Skills

- Break down large tasks
- Estimate time for each part
- Work on tasks in parallel
- Track your progress



Communication Skills

- Communicate with participants
- Share ideas with tutors and peers
- Listen actively
- Present findings clearly
- Write strong proposals and reports



Technological & Digital Skills

- Search for relevant information
- Assess sources critically
- Use tech to collect and analyse data
- Present findings digitally



Initial Feelings About Research

Common Feelings at the Start

- Excitement mixed with doubt or overwhelm
- Worries about workload and balancing commitments
- Fear of not being “good enough”
- Questioning career direction

Common Misconceptions

- “Research is boring or too difficult”
- “It’s only for experts”
- “It won’t change anything”

What Helps You Succeed

- Self-motivation
- Self-confidence
- Relationship resilience



Activity 1.3 – Identifying Benefits from Research

- **Scenario** Your CEO attended a webinar on *employee wellbeing*. Your manager suggests evaluating your organisation's wellbeing policies as your research project.
- **Discussion Questions**
 - ✓ What are 3 benefits for *you* as the researcher?
 - ✓ What are 3 benefits for *your employer*?
 - ⚠ What challenges might you face with this project?
- **Optional Prep**
 - Review CIPD wellbeing resources: cipd.org/uk
 - Explore the latest CIPD wellbeing survey: Health and Well-being at Work

Benefits of a Wellbeing Project

- Boosts career prospects
- Relevant and high-profile HR topic
- Personal interest and motivation
- Access to internal data and support
- Possible work-time involvement



Benefits for the Organisation

For Your Employer

- Addresses wellbeing challenges and costs
- Aligns with strategic priorities
- Encourages staff engagement
- Uses internal knowledge and access
- Builds evidence for future decisions



Challenges & Key Questions

Challenges You Might Face

- Time constraints and workload
- Access to sensitive data
- Union involvement and stakeholder buy-in
- Balancing academic vs organisational goals
- Limited authority to drive change

Key Questions to Ask

- What's the scope and commitment required?
- Is it feasible for a student project?
- How does it add value to the organisation and HR community?



What is HR Research?

- Research = systematic enquiry into HR issues
- Aim: increase knowledge and support effective action
- Focus on applied knowledge in real organisations
- Requires reliable evidence and good-quality information



Why HR Research Matters

- Helps link theory and practice
- Provides evidence for HR decisions
- Supports organisational improvement
- Builds professional credibility



The Systematic Approach

- Clear design and process are essential
- Transparency in methods and analysis
- Achieving research objectives depends on systematic enquiry
- Without clarity, research loses credibility



Pure vs Applied Research

Pure Research (Mode 1)

- Explains phenomena
- Builds and tests theories
- Focus on general knowledge

Applied Research (Mode 2)

- Solves practical problems
- Predicts effects
- Develops actions in real contexts



Why Applied Research Matters in HR

- Supports evidence-based practice
- Challenges assumptions
- Generates new insights
- Helps solve complex HR problems
- Aligns with changing organisational priorities



The Goal of HR Research

- Advance knowledge in a principled way
- Contribute to solving HR problems
- Support continuous organisational development
- Strengthen HRM and HRD professional practice



What Kind of a Researcher Are You?

- There's no single “right way” to do research
- Every researcher works differently based on their style and strengths
- Reflecting on your approach helps shape your project
- Consider your preferred learning style
- Use this insight to choose a topic and plan effectively



Insider or Outsider?

Types of Insider Researchers

- Researching your own role or team
- Exploring internal meanings and experiences

Types of Outsider Researchers

- Researching another part of your organisation
- Researching an external organisation

Implications for Your Research

- Insiders: deeper context, more narrative
- Outsiders: broader perspective, more objectivity
- Your position shapes access, interpretation and outcomes



What Kind of Researcher Are You?

Three Ideal Types (Brown, 2006)



Detective

- Investigates problems
- Looks for evidence and patterns
- Aims to uncover the truth



Doctor

- Diagnoses issues
- Offers solutions and interventions
- Focuses on improving organisational health



Explorer

- Explores new ideas and perspectives
- Open to unexpected findings
- Seeks deeper understanding

Which type do you identify with most — or do you blend more than one?

Descriptive Research

- Focuses on *what, when, where, and who*
- Builds an accurate profile of people, events or situations
- Often the first step before deeper analysis
- Uses both qualitative and quantitative data



Explanatory Research

- Focuses on *why* and *how*
- Explores causes and relationships
- Aims to explain problems and recommend improvements
- Uses both qualitative and quantitative data



Exploratory Research

- Seeks new insights and fresh understanding
- Asks open-ended questions
- Often used when little is known about the topic
- Usually relies on qualitative methods



Activity 1.4 – How Real is Fake News?

- Fake news = misinformation or hoaxes spread via media/social platforms
- Motivations: political, financial, social influence, entertainment
- Reflect on recent examples you've seen

Discussion Questions

- How real is fake news?
- In what ways is fake news *real*?
- In what ways is fake news *not real*?



Fake News & Research

- Fake news varies by region (e.g. Covid-19 anti-vax in Europe, cattle disease in India)
- Raises questions about *reality* and how we interpret events
- Facts vs context: some argue truth is only about evidence, others stress interpretation
- Digital technology challenges what we see/hear as “real”
- Credibility and believability are central — what criteria make information trustworthy?
- For HR research: need clarity about what is “real” and how we define “truth”
- Researchers must reflect on assumptions about reality, knowledge and trustworthy evidence



Real-World Views in HR Research

- **Three Perspectives**
- **Objective view** → Reality is “out there”
- **Individually constructed view** → Reality is “in here” (perceptions & feelings)
- **Socially constructed view** → Reality shaped by both personal perceptions and social context



Why It Matters

- Your world view influences **how you design research**
- Objective view → facts, generalisation, quantitative data, HR analytics (positivist approach)
- Socially constructed view → meanings, qualitative data, interviews/observations (interpretivist approach)
- Different researchers adopt different positions depending on background and discipline



Case Example – Retention & Working Hours

Miznah (Food Retail)

- Used **survey questionnaires** (quantitative)
(Measured job satisfaction, stress, work–life balance, intention to leave)
- Aim: provide **generalised conclusions** about turnover factors
- **World view:** *Objective / Positivist* (facts, measurable data)

Alexander (Hospitality)

- Used **in-depth interviews** (qualitative)
(Explored employee experiences and perceptions)
- Aim: gain **deep understanding** of work–life issues
- **World view:** *Socially Constructed / Interpretivist* (meanings, perspectives)

Key Question

- Which approach is superior? → Neither.
- Each is valuable depending on purpose, context and research goals.

Activity 1.5 – What Kind of a Researcher Are You?

Reflection Questions

- Insider or outsider?
 - Will you research in your own organisation or elsewhere?
 - What challenges might you face in gaining access?
- Facts or meanings?
 - Do you prefer general trends and data or deeper insights into experiences?
- Research role?
 - Do you see yourself as a *doctor*, *explorer*, *detective* — or a mix?
- World view?
 - Are you more comfortable with an *objectivist* (facts) or *constructivist* (meanings) approach?
- Focus?
 - Do you value *individual stories* or the *overall organisational picture*?



Figure 1.4 – Factors Affecting the Employment Relationship



Adapted from Robson & McCarten (2016)

Activity 1.6 – Audiences for HR Research

- **Task** Using Figure 1.4, list groups who might be interested in HR research findings. For each group, consider:
 - Why would they care?
 - How would they access the research?



Audiences for HR Research

Who Might Be Interested in Your Findings?

- Individual practitioners
- Individual managers
- Members of trades unions
- Central government departments
- Local authority representatives
- Specialist organisations / pressure groups
- Professional associations
- Academics
- Consultants
- Employer / trade bodies
- Trades union members
- Students
- Providers of outsourced HR services



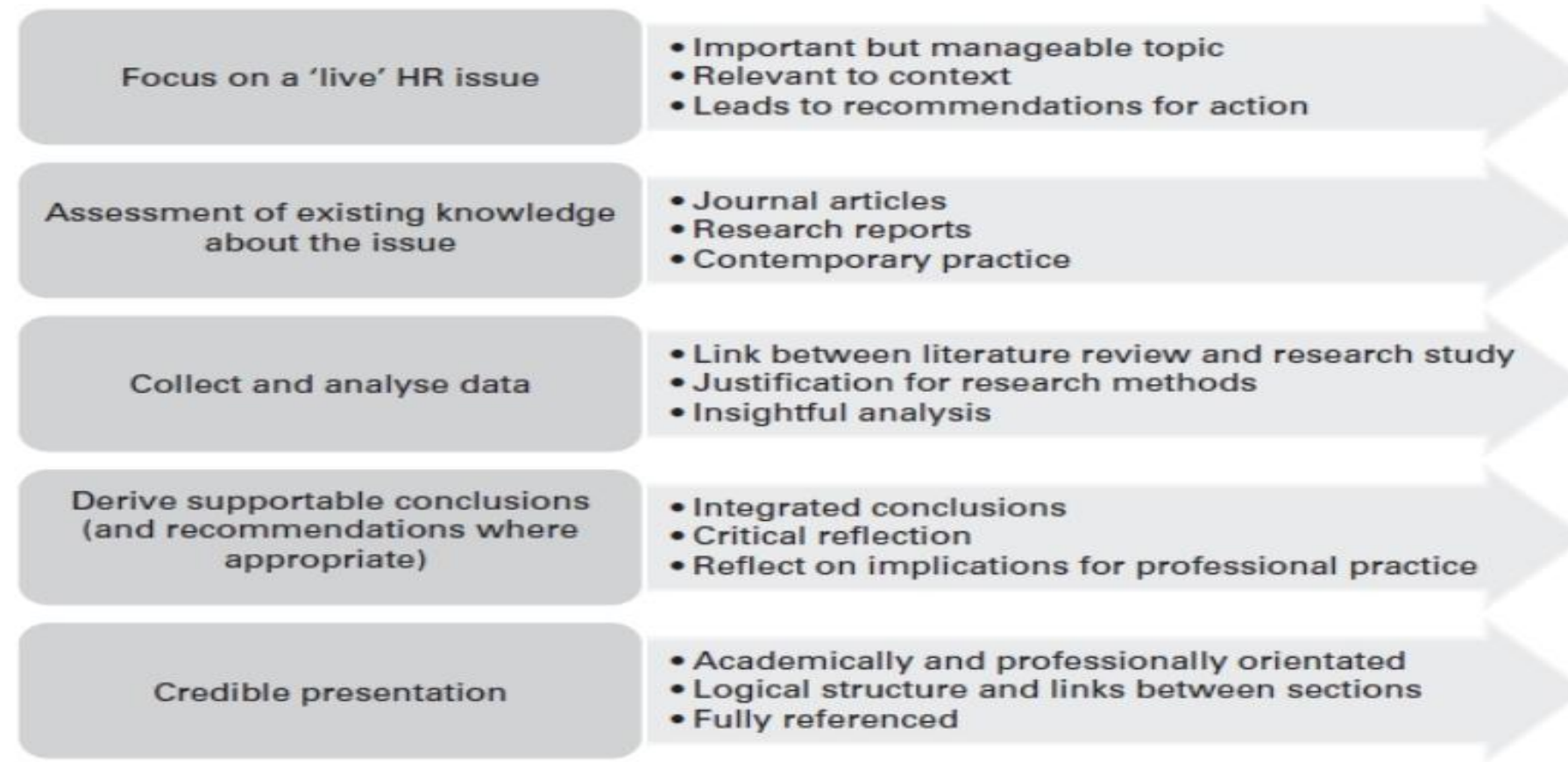
How Audiences Access HR Research Common Channels & Formats

- News feeds
- Web pages
- Internal or external reports
- Books
- Trade journals
- Professional journals
- Social media (e.g. Twitter, LinkedIn)
- Webcasts, YouTube, TED Talks
- Conferences and seminars
- Academic journals
- White and green papers
- Social networking sites
- Unpublished research (e.g. dissertations, student projects)



Characteristics of a Research Project in HR

Figure 1.6 Characteristics of a research project in HR



Choosing a 'Live' HR Issue

- Pick a topic that is **current, relevant and meaningful**
- It should be **interesting to you** and offer **added value** to others (HR professionals, tutors, peers)
- Keep it **manageable** — not too broad but still academically challenging
- Look for inspiration:
 - Past dissertations or projects
 - CIPD research page for recent studies



Collect and Analyse Data

All HR projects require **data collection and analysis**

- Two types of data:
 - **Primary data** → collected directly from participants (e.g. surveys, interviews)
 - **Secondary data** → existing sources (e.g. reports, datasets, HR records)
- Both types can offer valuable insights

Example: **Workplace Employment Relations Study (WERS)** — in Britain widely used for analysing work experience and people management



Derive Supportable Conclusions

Draw **overall, integrated conclusions** from your data

- Reflect **critically** on:
 - Insights gained
 - Limitations of your data and methods
- Use journal articles to explore how others discuss limitations
- Consider **implications for professional HR practice**
- Most HR research is **applied** — your findings should be relevant and actionable



Credible Presentation of Your Research

Your report may be the **longest and most important document** you've written

Aim for **academic and professional credibility**

- Key elements:
 - Clear, persuasive writing
 - Careful proof-reading
 - Effective use of graphics and charts
 - Accurate referencing and citation

Follow the Academy 21's **presentation guidelines**

Research proposals & business reports or essays



• Writing Your Final Research Proposal

Purpose of the Proposal

- Formal document that must be **approved before dissertation work begins**
- Shows your ability to plan and structure research at Master's level
- Provides a basis for **feedback and supervision**
- Ensures your project is **academically credible** and **feasible preferably using secondary data only**
- **What It Should Do**
- Clearly state your **research focus**
- Demonstrate awareness of **existing knowledge and gaps**
- Outline your **methodological approach** (secondary data only)
- Show consideration of **ethics and limitations**
- Present a realistic **timeline** and preliminary **bibliography**



Key Requirements (Check Guidelines)

- Refer to **Dissertation Guidelines** in the course depository
- The proposal is **formative** → feedback only, not a summative mark
- Must be submitted using the **Academy's prescribed template** (Annex B – Full Research Proposal Form)
- Includes multiple sections:
 - Title
 - Summary (≈250–300 words)
 - Research questions/objectives
 - Literature review (≈250–300 words)
 - Methodology (secondary data only) (≈250–300 words)
 - Ethical considerations (≈250–300 words)
 - Limitations (≈250–300 words)
 - Timeline
 - Preliminary bibliography (min. 20 references, Harvard style)
- Each section has its own **word expectations and requirements**



Working with Your Supervisor

- Supervisory relationship differs from tutorials
- Usually **one-to-one**, sometimes small group meetings
- Supervisors have different **backgrounds, experiences and styles**
- You also bring your own **preferences and ways of working**
- Success depends on **mutual understanding and adaptation**



- Establish the Format, Basis and Frequency of Meetings
- Identify Times When Either of You Will Not Be Contactable
- Identify Key Areas Where You Need Support
- Establish Project Milestones and Deadlines
- Be Honest About Aspirations and Priorities
- Communicate About Missed Meetings or Deadlines
- Allow Time for Supervisor to Read Drafts



Working as a Practitioner-Researcher

- Many student projects are undertaken by those **already employed in HR**
- Focus is often on solving a **specific HR problem or issue**
- This gives the project an **action orientation**
- A practitioner-researcher is:
 - An experienced HR professional
 - Conducting research relevant to their current role
- Options for topic choice:
 - Related to **day-to-day responsibilities**
 - A **new area** where useful data can be obtained



Types of Practitioner-Researchers

- **Part-time students** → research within their employing organisation (employee)
- **Full-time students with part-time jobs** → research linked to their employment
- **Full-time students on placements** → research project within placement organisation



Advantages of Being a Practitioner-Researcher

- **Insider knowledge** → access to data and context outsiders lack
- **Practical influence** → recommendations more likely to be implemented
- **Synergy between theory and practice** → ability to connect academic research with organisational realities
- **Relevant outcomes** → easier to design studies that contribute to both knowledge and practice



Disadvantages of Being a Practitioner-Researcher

- **Time pressure** → balancing project with normal workload
- **Potential bias** → harder to stay objective when familiar with the organisation
- **Status issues** → low status = project not taken seriously; high status = participants less open
- **Confidentiality concerns** → need to respect sensitive data and ethics
- **Critical stance** → organisations may resist critique
- **Instrumental risk** → project seen as serving qualification rather than solving problems



Thank you
for
your
attention!

