Research Methods

Lecture Title: Planning the Research Process

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Masters in
Human Resources Management

Lecture Outline

- HRM research and data
- Qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method research
- Research, theory and practice
- Data quality issues
- Planning to gather data
- Writing a compelling methodology section

Overall, Purpose of the Lecture

- Guides you to make coherent, justifiable decisions about your research process
- Brings together ideas from earlier lectures (topic focus, strategy, design)
- Helps you decide:
  - Which types of data are most appropriate
  - How to put your ideas into practice
- How to record all this in the methodology chapter

Risks of Skipping Planning

- Temptation: Start data collection immediately
- Problems if skipped:
  - Poor quality data
  - Weak analysis
  - Incoherent project design
  - Regret when facing difficulties in later stages

Key message: **Invest time now → save effort later**

1. HRM Research and Data

HRM Research: Understanding Data and Methods

- All research needs data
- HR research uses many different types of data
- Choice of data depends on the research question

Why Data Matters in HRM Research

- Data provides evidence to answer research questions
- Without data, research is only opinion or assumption
- Careful choice of data improves the quality and credibility of your study

Two Types of HRM Research Questions

- **Organisational focus**: What HR practices are adopted? How are they implemented?
- **Employee focus**: How do HR practices affect perceptions, attitudes, behaviour and wellbeing?

Different questions require different methods and data sources

Qualitative Research in HRM

Used when exploring meanings, experiences and processes

Common methods:

- Interviews with HR managers or employees
- Focus groups
- Observations

Strengths:

- Rich, detailed information
- Helps understand how and why practices are used

Example: Interviews to explore how employees form opinions about their managers

Quantitative Research in HRM

Used when measuring relationships, testing theories or predicting outcomes

Common methods:

- Surveys with structured questions
- Use of validated scales (e.g. job satisfaction, turnover intentions)

Strengths:

- Large samples
- Statistical analysis possible
- Results can be generalised

Example: Surveys to identify predictors of turnover intentions

Mixed-Method Research in HRM

Combines qualitative and quantitative approaches

Useful when:

- You want both depth (qualitative) and breadth (quantitative)
- You need to prove with stories or examples and explain numbers

Example:

- Interviews to explore employee opinions
- Surveys to measure attitudes across the organisation

Ethical Considerations in HRM Research

- Protecting anonymity and confidentiality of participants
- Ensuring honesty in responses
- Using validated tools to improve reliability
- Respecting participants' rights and wellbeing

Choosing the Right Approach

Depends on:

- The research question(s)
- Access to participants and resources
- Time available

Always justify your choice of method in your project or dissertation

= Key Decision Takeaways

HRM research requires clear decisions about data and methods

- Qualitative → explores meanings and experiences
- Quantitative → measures relationships and predicts outcomes
- Mixed-method → combines both for stronger evidence
- Ethical practice is essential for credible research

Understanding Types of HRM Research

Researchers in HRM study different aspects of how people and organisations work

Wright and Boswell (2002) created a framework to help us understand the **main types of HRM research**

- Their typology is based on two key questions:
  - **Who is being studied?**
    - Individuals or whole organisations
    - This is called the **level of analysis** (micro or macro)
  - **How many HR practices are being studied?**
    - One specific practice or a full set of practices
    - This is called the **scope of HR practices**
- **Why this matters:**
- Helps you choose the right focus for your own research
- Guides your decision about methods and data
- Shows how HRM research can explore both individual experiences and organisational strategies

The Two Dimensions

Level of analysis

- *Micro level*: focuses on individuals or small groups
- *Macro level*: focuses on whole organisations

Scope of HR practices

- *Single practice*: e.g. training, recruitment
- *Multiple practices*: e.g. full HR strategy or systems

Micro HRM Research

Focus: impact of HR practices on individuals

- Linked to work psychology
- Studies effects on:
  - Skills, attitudes, behaviour
  - Outcomes like productivity, absenteeism, turnover

Example: How training affects employee motivation

Macro HRM Research

Focus: how HR practices affect the whole organisation

- Assumes consistency across the organisation

Studies effects on:

- Organisational performance
- Employee engagement

Example: How an integrated HR strategy improves company results

Typology of HRM Research (Wright & Boswell, 2002)

How to use this typology:

- Helps you decide where your research fits
- Guides your choice of method and data
- Supports your justification in proposals and dissertations

Level of Analysis	Many HR Practices	Single HR Practice
Organisation	Strategic HRM, Employment relations systems, Organisational excellence	Relationship between single HR practices and organisational performance
Individual	Psychological contract, Employee engagement	HRM function, Individual/work psychology

Choosing Your Approach

- Your choice depends on:
  - Your research interests and goals
  - Access to organisations or individuals
  - Your preferred research philosophy and method

No single “correct” approach — choose what fits your question best

Always justify your choice clearly in your proposal or methodology chapter

2. Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed-Method Research

Types of Research and Data in HRM

- Research traditions influence the type of data used
- Here we will cover again:
  - Positivist and interpretivist approaches
  - Quantitative and qualitative data
  - Mixed-method research

Research Traditions and World Views

- **Positivism**:
  - Scientific world view
  - Based on objectivity and measurement
  - Uses methods from physical sciences
- **Constructivism/Interpretivism**:
  - Human-centred world view
  - Based on interpretation and meaning
  - Focuses on understanding people's experiences

Positivist (Objectivist) Research

- Uses the **scientific method**
- Collects facts and indicators
- Tests relationships between variables
- Aims to make general conclusions
- Common in quantitative studies

Interpretivist (Constructivist) Research

- Explores **meanings and experiences**
- Focuses on people in different situations or cultures
- Aims to understand and explain in detail
- Common in qualitative studies

Types of Data

Data Type	Definition	Used By
Quantitative	Data that can be counted or measured	Positivist researchers
Qualitative	Data based on words, meanings, and experiences	Interpretivist researchers

Mixed-method research combines both types
Choice depends on your research question and approach

Key Decision Takeaways

Your research tradition affects how you collect and interpret data

- Positivist → quantitative → facts and numbers
- Interpretivist → qualitative → meanings and stories
- Mixed-method → combines both for deeper understanding

Always match your data type to your research question and justify your choice

Choosing the Right Research Methods

- **Qualitative Methods: Exploring Meaning**
- Common methods:
  - Interviews
  - Focus groups
  - Diaries or reflective journals
- Strengths:
  - Rich, detailed understanding
  - Can explore personal views and experiences
  - Allows probing and follow-up questions

Useful for understanding *why* people think or behave in certain ways

Quantitative Methods: Measuring Patterns

Common method:

Surveys or questionnaires with structured questions

Strengths:

- Can be replicated across different groups
- Allows comparison between organisations or demographics
- Anonymity encourages honest responses
- Suitable for identifying relationships between variables (e.g. age, education, attitudes)

Mixed-Method Research: Combining Strengths

Combines qualitative and quantitative approaches

Example sequence:

- Use surveys to find broad patterns
- Use interviews to explore deeper meanings behind those patterns

Benefits:

- More complete understanding
- Balances structure with depth

Challenges:

- Time-consuming
- Requires different skills for data collection and analysis

Practical Considerations

Think about:

- Your time and resources
- Your confidence with different methods
- Access to participants
- Ethical issues (e.g. anonymity, consent)

One well-executed method is better than two poorly managed ones

Choose methods that match your research question and your capacity

3. Research, Theory and Practice

Research can take different roles:

- **Explorer** → discovering new areas
- **Detective** → investigating causes and links
- **Doctor** → solving problems and offering solutions

Whatever your role, you must connect your work to **theory**

Why Theory Matters

Theory gives a **framework** for your research

It guides:

- What data you collect
- Where you look for data
- How you interpret and explain findings

Without theory, research risks being unclear or disconnected

Practice-Based Research

Practice-based research links **real-world problems** with **academic theory**

- It ensures your study is:
  - Relevant to organisations and HR practice
  - Grounded in established knowledge

Balances practical insights with theoretical reasoning

Your Reasoning Process

Be clear about:

- How you are using theory
- Why you chose certain data sources
- How your analysis connects back to your research questions

This makes your research **justifiable and defensible**

Activity Note – Web Search

- Task: Use a **general search engine** (Google, Bing, Yahoo)
- Type in the search words: **“career theory”**
- Look at the first results that appear

Common Career Theories Found

- **Holland's Theory of Career Choice** → jobs fit personality types
- **Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory** → choices shaped by learning, self-belief, environment
- **Super's Life-Span Theory** → career development happens in stages across life

Why Theory Matters

- Theory is the **foundation** of HR research and practice
- Provides a **home** for your project
- Explains how HR phenomena are related and why

Theory in HR Practice

HR professionals use theories (often without realising)

Evaluating theories helps:

- Understand organisational problems
- Plan HR interventions
- Increase chance of success

Next Steps

- Read through the career theories found in your search
- Decide which theory best supports your research reasoning
- Explore journals like:
  - *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*
  - *Journal of Career Development*

= Key Takeaway

- Theory is essential, not optional
- It connects **research, practice, and professional decision-making**

Strong theory = stronger HR interventions and outcomes

Theory, Models and Frameworks

In everyday talk, people often use **“theory”** to mean an **opinion** or a **guess**

In HR practice, many decisions are based on **intuition** or personal ideas

In **HR research**, theory has a different meaning:

- A **logical model or framework** of concepts (abstract ideas)
- Explains **how things are related** to each other
- Can be applied in **different situations**

Good research uses and refines theory to make findings **credible and useful**

Why Theory is Useful in HR

Theory supports HR practice in **three main ways**:

- Helps us understand what is happening
- Helps us see issues from more than one perspective
- Provides a basis for models and frameworks of practice

Understanding What is Happening

- HR professionals face many people-related problems
- They need more than “know-about” knowledge → they need **“know-why” knowledge**
- Theory gives this deeper understanding and helps communicate organisational messages clearly

Seeing Issues from Different Perspectives

- People issues are complex and never simple
- Theory allows HR to look through **different lenses**
- HR practice draws on many disciplines:
  - Systems theory
  - Complexity theory
  - Psychology, sociology, economics, anthropology

- Helps diagnose problems and evaluate credible solutions

Models and Frameworks in Practice

Models come from theories → they represent what is happening in organisations

Example: **Performance-related pay** (based on economic theory)

- Explains reward linked to performance
- But other theories (human action, development) show possible negative effects

Frameworks also link to theory and models

Example: **Kirkpatrick's four levels of training evaluation**

- Provides structure to assess training value
- Grounded in systems theory

= Key Takeaway

- Theory is not just abstract → it is practical and essential
- It gives HR professionals:
  - **Know-why knowledge**
  - Multiple perspectives
  - Strong models and frameworks

This makes HR practice more credible, effective and evidence-based

Where Do Theories Come From?

- Everyday HR practice would be hard without theory
- **Theory and practice** are two sides of the same coin
- Both help us learn and make sense of the world

Kolb's Learning Cycle (1984)

- Learning happens in stages that feed into each other:
- **Practice (doing)** – carrying out the activity
- **Reflection (thinking)** – reviewing what went well or not
- **Generalisation (guidelines)** – creating rules or principles (dos and don'ts)
- **Implementation (trying again)** – applying lessons in the next attempt

The cycle can begin at any stage and repeats over time

Example – Recruitment Interviewing

- HR practitioners often start interviews with little training
- They feel nervous but follow company procedures
- After the interview, they reflect on strengths and weaknesses
- They create personal guidelines (dos and don’ts)
- Next interview → apply guidelines → reflect again → improve further
- Over time, training and reading enhance practice

Theory-Building Processes

- **Deduction:** Start with theory → test it with data
- **Induction:** Start with data/experience → build theory from patterns

- Both are used in HR research and practice

= Key Takeaway

- Theories grow out of **learning, reflection and practice**
- They help HR professionals move from “what happened” to “why it happened”
- Deduction and induction are reasoning tools for building credible theories

Deduction and Induction

Theories are always provisional → they can never be 100% proven (Lee & Lings, 2008)

- **Deductive reasoning:**
  - Starts with a theory or proposition (what should happen)
  - Tests it in different contexts or situations
  - Evidence shows if the theory can be confirmed or needs to be changed
- **Inductive reasoning:**
  - Starts with observations or data
  - Looks for patterns and builds theory from them

Both processes are used in HR research to refine and improve understanding

Inductive/reflective Reasoning

- Starts at the **level of practice**
- Researcher gathers data → looks for patterns
- Develops **general propositions** about what is happening
- This process is called **theory-building**

Link to Deductive Reasoning

- Inductive theories can later be tested using **deductive methods**
- Deduction = testing propositions with evidence in different contexts
- Together, both approaches strengthen theory

HR Research Reality

- Most HR research does not create brand-new theories
- Practitioner-researchers usually work at the **margins of existing theory**
- The aim is to **add ideas**, **expand explanations** or **show weaknesses**

Importance of a Theoretical Anchor

- Every project needs a clear **theoretical starting point**
- This anchor helps you:
  - Connect practice with theory
  - Justify your research choices
  - Contribute new insights to existing knowledge

= Key Takeaway

- Induction builds theory from practice
- Deduction tests theory with evidence
- Both are rooted in practice and theory
- Clear theoretical anchors make HR research credible and useful

Case Example 5.3 – Choosing a Research Approach

- Guillaume: part-time HR student, working in a government education ministry
- Context:
  - Government wants **performance-orientated management**
  - HR decisions based on **competence**, not family connections or patronage
- Task: Find an **objective and reliable recruitment and selection process**
- Focus of dissertation: **Evaluation of psychometric methods of selection**

Research Reading

- Found little reference to theory in recruitment/selection literature
- Many lists of methods → most authors recommend **mix of methods** for reliability
- Strong focus on **scientific methods**:
  - Psychometric testing
  - Assessment centres

Discussion Question 1

Deductive or Inductive Approach?

- **Deductive:**
  - Suitable if Guillaume tests existing theories about psychometric methods
  - Uses evidence to confirm or refine propositions
- **Inductive:**
  - Suitable if Guillaume gathers data from practice to build new insights

Most appropriate: **Deductive**, as he is evaluating psychometric methods already established in literature

Discussion Question 2

- **What Theories Could Support This Research?**
- **Psychometric theory** → reliability and validity of tests
- **Competency-based theory** → linking skills and behaviours to job performance
- **Organisational performance theory** → improving efficiency and reducing bureaucracy
- **Fairness and equity theories** → ensuring objective recruitment, avoiding patronage

Feedback Notes – Choosing an Approach

- In some research situations, you cannot rule out either **inductive** or **deductive** approaches
- Guillaume had to consider both before deciding on his dissertation focus

Inductive Approach

- Reading showed many factors affect employee performance:
  - Expectations, management style, clarity, training, rewards
- Idea: Ask **new staff and managers** about their experiences
- Aim: Identify what helps or hinders performance
- Outcome: Make rounded recommendations for **selection and induction processes**
- Challenge: Literature mainly described models/frameworks, with little explicit theory

Deductive Approach

- Idea: Take a sample of staff (high performers + low performers)
- Give them different **psychometric tests**
- Analyse which tests best predict work performance
- Outcome: Test propositions about the **predictive ability** of psychometric methods

Theoretical Anchors

- If exploring organisational factors → ground research in **systems theory**
- If testing psychometric methods → use **psychological theories** about:
  - Personality traits
  - Attributes
  - Work performance

=Key Takeaway

- Both inductive and deductive approaches can be valid in HR research
- Choice depends on:
  - Research questions
  - Available data
  - Theoretical perspective
- Clear theoretical positioning makes research credible and useful

Inductive and Deductive Approaches to Research

- **Inductive approach**:
  - Starts with practice and data
  - Builds theory from patterns and observations
  - Linked to **constructivist** and **interpretivist** views → meaning is shaped by context and experience
  - Focus: **Theory-building**
- **Deductive approach**:
  - Starts with theory or hypothesis
  - Tests theory using evidence
  - Linked to **objectivist** and **positivist** views → knowledge is tested and measured
  - Focus: **Theory-testing**
- Both approaches are valuable in HR research
  - Choice depends on your research question, context, and purpose

4. Data Quality Issues

Good research must have **relevant and trustworthy data**

Two key concepts: **Reliability** and **Validity**

- 🔁 **Reliability**
- Means **repeatability of findings**
- If the same study is repeated, results should be the same
- Reliable research is:
  - Trustworthy
  - Fair
  - Objectively undertaken (Biggam, 2021)
- ✅ **Validity**
- Means **credibility and believability** of research
- Valid research uses:
  - Appropriate strategies and data collection methods
  - Proper implementation
- Ensures conclusions are **robust and confident**

Reliability – Key Questions

- Would similar observations be reached by different observers?
- Is it clear how raw data were collected and analysed?
- Would the same methods give the same results in similar situations?
- Reliability = trustworthy, fair and objective research

Validity – Key Questions

- Does the research measure what it claims to measure?
- How might the **context** affect the data collected?
- Has the enquiry process itself influenced the answers?
- Validity = credible, believable and robust conclusions

Improving Validity and Reliability

- Use **pre-validated questionnaires** (e.g. workplace violence scales)
- Check for **latest validated versions** in the country/language of study
- Avoid creating new questions unless no validated tool exists
- Ensure clear definitions of key terms (e.g. “violence at work”)

Examples of Validated Tools in HRM Research

Using Validated Tools to Improve Reliability

These tools help researchers collect trustworthy data and produce credible results.

Key Message:

Using validated tools helps ensure your data is accurate, consistent and suitable for analysis.

Tool Name	Purpose	Why It's Validated
General Health Questionnaire (GHQ)	Measures mental wellbeing and psychological distress	Used widely in workplace health studies with strong reliability
Perceived Organisational Support Scale	Assesses how supported employees feel by their organisation	Proven link to job satisfaction and commitment
Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity Scales	Measures clarity and conflict in job roles	Tested across sectors with consistent results
Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Scale	Assesses quality of relationship between managers and employees	Validated in leadership and performance research
Team Climate Inventory (TCI)	Measures team support, innovation, and shared goals	Used in team effectiveness studies across industries
Work–Life Balance Scale	Assesses how well employees manage work and personal life	Reliable across cultures and employment types

Data Collection Strategy

- Avoid **ad hoc or convenience samples**
- Do not mix different collection methods (e.g. online surveys + street interviews)
- Avoid influencing responses
- Collect **demographic data** to check representativeness

= Key Takeaway

- Reliability = repeatable and consistent results
- Validity = credible and accurate measurement
- Both are essential for **trustworthy HR research**
- Careful design, validated tools and clear strategy improve data quality

Credibility in Research

- No single project can be **100% reliable, valid, trustworthy and credible**
- Researchers must still **address these issues** carefully
- Important steps:
  - Take an **open-minded approach** to gathering data
  - Plan to **minimise limitations** of the study
  - Aim to **maximise credibility** of findings
- Requires a **planned approach** to data collection
- Be ready to **justify your decisions** about methods and tools
- This justification is written in the **methodology section** of your report

5. Planning to Gather Data

- **Preparation is essential** in any research project
- Plan your **data collection procedure** in advance
- 🔍 **Be Clear About:**
- **What data** you plan to collect
- **Why** you are collecting it
- How the data will help answer your **research questions**
- Reasons to justify:
  - The **methods** you use
  - The **sample** of respondents you invite
- 🛠️ **Instruments and Pilot Testing**
- Plan your **questionnaire or interview questions** carefully
- Run a small **pilot process** to check:
  - If questions are clear or ambiguous
  - How long interviews take in practice
  - Whether questions generate **useful, analysable data**

Planning for Persuasive Research

- Use **transparent, ethical and justifiable methods**
- Be clear and open about your own **position**:
  - In relation to the topic
  - In relation to participants
- **Fully inform participants**:
  - What you aim to learn
  - What their participation means for them
- **Consider alternative theories and interpretations** of your data
- Reflect not only on the **data itself**, but also on:
  - Your **role in the research**
  - The **implications** of your involvement

Making Methodology Credible

🔍 Step 1: Clarify Research Questions & Approach

- Define your **research questions/objectives** first
- Decide on **inductive or deductive approach**
- Discuss with stakeholders (organisation, supervisor, tutor)
- Approach chosen will shape reading and data methods

Identify Needed Information

- Work out **what data** you need and **where to find it**
- Avoid relying only on “easy to find” information
- Consider **ethical requirements** of organisation and study centre
- Discuss feasibility and ethics with project supervisor

Use Multiple Sources

- Don’t rush only to collect **primary data**
- Also use:
  - **Documentary evidence** already in the organisation
  - **Secondary data** from published sources
- Wider sources strengthen credibility

Define Population & Sample

- Identify your **research population** (people, departments, organisations)
- Justify your **sample selection**
- Sampling is usually required → explain how and why
- Discuss with supervisor

Plan Instruments & Pilot

- Choose type(s) of **primary data** (questionnaire, interview, focus group)
- Design carefully → avoid missing or weak data
- Run a **pilot test** → amend before full data collection

Recording & Analysis

- Decide in advance **how to record data**
- Plan **how to analyse data**
- Link to methods (Lectures 7–11)

Data Quality & Critical Friend

- No study is fully valid or reliable
- Be **critically evaluative** early
- Ask a **critical friend** to challenge your plan
- Address possible weaknesses → improves credibility
- Be ready to discuss **advantages and limitations** in your report

6. Writing a Compelling Methodology Section

- The **methodology chapter** explains how your research was designed and carried out
- It shows how you gathered and analysed **primary and secondary data**
- It helps your tutor assess the **quality and credibility** of your work
- Your study centre guidelines may have different expectations
- Always check:
  - Required **length**
  - Specific **issues** to explain

The Methodology Chapter

🔍 **Purpose**

- Explains the **basis of your research design**
- Describes your **methods of data gathering**
- Outlines the **piloting process** you carried out
- Shows how you ensured **data quality**

🧠 **Why It Matters**

- Helps your tutor assess the **credibility of your data**
- Crucial to the **mark you will receive**
- Poor quality data → weak conclusions that lack credibility

🌍 **What to Include**

- Your **research design** (overall plan)
- Specific **methods** (e.g. survey, interviews, observation)
- **Pilot testing** results and adjustments made
- Justification for your choices → why these methods suit your research questions
- Reflection on **limitations** and how you tried to minimise them

Appropriateness of Methods

- Explain the **context** of your research
  - If in one organisation → describe the organisational setting
- Clarify your **relationship** with the organisation
- State your **research questions**
- Describe your **data gathering approach**:
  - Qualitative, quantitative or mixed
  - Justify your choice

Quality and Quantity of Data

- Describe how you found **secondary sources**
  - Literature search
  - Organisational documents
- Explain what **primary data** you collected
- Justify your **sample selection**
- Describe how you developed your **data gathering instruments**
  - Questionnaires, interview questions etc
- Mention any **standard measures** used (e.g. validated scales)
- Report **response rates** and discuss their impact
- Explain how you **analysed the data**

Access and Ethics

- Describe how the **study context** affected the research process
- Identify any **ethical issues** and how you handled them
- Explain how you dealt with:
- Informed consent
- Anonymity
- Confidentiality
- Sensitive topics
- Right to withdraw
- Non-responses (e.g. unreturned questionnaires)

Evaluation of Methods

- Discuss any **data quality issues**
- Reflect on the **advantages** of your methods
- Be honest about the **limitations**

Small sample size

Limited access to organisations

Time constraints

Low response rate

- Show how you tried to **minimise weaknesses** and **maximise credibility**

How you tried to minimise weaknesses and maximise credibility

Limitation	How to Acknowledge It
Small sample size	“This study involved only 20 participants, which may limit how far the findings can be generalised.”
Limited access to organisations	“Access was restricted to one organisation, so the results may not reflect wider industry practices.”
Time constraints	“Due to time limits, only one method of data collection was used.”
Language barriers	“Some participants were non-native speakers, which may have affected how they understood the questions.”
Low response rate	“Only 35% of surveys were returned, which may affect the reliability of the results.”

Thank you for your attention!