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# Curriculum Development for the Delivery of a Standardised Business Research Methods Module

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# 5. Curriculum Development for the Delivery of a Standardised Business Research Methods Module[1]

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## Abstract

The goal of this project is to provide a framework for a revised delivery of Research Methods across the College of Business. This project considers a number of issues and misconceptions that needed to be overcome regarding the delivery of Research Methods (RM) as a module and the recognition of RM as a discipline. This includes the misconception that 'commonality' of the student cohort was required for the delivery of RM and the issue of student disengagement. The outputs of this project are Module Descriptors for a generalised Research Report, case studies representing best practice in other institutions and the introduction of the Research Skills Development Framework through pedagogic development.

**Key words:** curriculum development, modularisation, research methods

## Outline of the Fellowship Project

### Introduction

The Research Skills Development Framework (RSDF) is presented as a way to encourage discussion on how to teach Research Methods across the College of Business. This is done to illustrate that commonality among students was not required to fully understand the process of research. The next stage of the process was to tackle student disengagement regarding the discipline of RM. The RSDF is proposed as a way to allow student researchers to take control of the development of their own research skills and reduce possible disengagement from the research process. The final stage of this process is to institutionalise best practice into module descriptors and validation documents of developing courses.

## Evaluation of the Project

This project was evaluated on the basis of its implementation. Revised Module Descriptors have been implemented across two M.Sc. programmes: the MBA Programme and the M.Sc. Business & Entrepreneurship for the 2010–2011 academic calendars. Case studies illustrating this approach in other institutions are presented to support the use of the RSDF in pedagogic development. This was important so as to get buy in from the academic cohort. Student disengagement is dealt with through the development of activities that build awareness among the student cohort as they take responsibility for developing their own research skills. This will be evaluated at the end of the first semester and Academic Year 2010–2011 through a survey technique. Ongoing evaluation is on the basis of college discussions at College Day, Teaching and Learning Conferences and Management Forum where this project was presented and discussed. The logic behind the Research Skills Development Framework (RSDF) is important in securing a different perspective on how Research Methods should be approached. The presence of this conversation was timely. Recessionary times demand more efficiency in teaching delivery; an acceptance of combining classes was seen in that context.

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## Fellowship Project Outputs

*Teaching Outcomes*
The teaching experience and the experience of the wider faculty was assessed to ensure that the 'research agenda' of the College of Business is supported, enhanced and improved.

Module Descriptors for both the Research Methods (RM) Module and resultant Research Report Module Descriptor were presented and finalised. These have already been validated on two Masters' programmes. The Research Methods Module is written with a number of options in place for assessment and content delivery. The content, and/or activities, of this module should be linked into the skills required to complete the assessment for the module and to be firmly placed to allow students to move toward completing the Research Report. This module focuses on explaining the 'research process' and the multiple forms this process can take. The Research Report Module is written so as to link specifically to the Research Methods module that preceded it. The term 'Research Report' is used as it reflects multiple outputs from the research process. An additional outcome that will come from this is to re-write module descriptors with an RSD-based approach. This was partially completed and can be implemented on a pedagogic level. However a rubric (implied or explicit) for assessing this will take longer to implement. For now the RSDF is used as a teaching aid.

*Administrative Outcomes*
The clear outcomes of this project will be the possible and successful combining of RM class cohorts from dissimilar disciplinary backgrounds. Where this improves standards and streamlines administrative duties will be used to evaluate the success of this project review. Currently this has been proposed and is being considered by management. A common module for Research Methods will now be run in the first semester of the academic year 2010–2011. Administratively this would be open to all M.Sc. students (including a proposed M.Sc. in Research in the long term) and M.Phil. students. M.Phil. students will also be offered a chance to take the RM module. Those intending to move onto the Ph.D. register would be required to complete extra modules in the future (as a part of a proposed M.Sc. in Research Methods). This module will run at a reduced number of times as this tackles the misplaced **assumption of cohort commonality**. One proposed way to run this would be to allocated three or four sessions spread across day and evening slots. Students would sign up for these slots. Plenary Sessions would also be run where students are exposed to alternative approaches to doing research. These sessions might require two facilitators to reflect a dialectical approach to delivering this part of the module. Most of these recommendations will not run in 2010–2011 but management are moving in this direction.

*Student Outcomes*
The student experience in relation to their perspectives of the RM module and the college support provided to meet the college's research agenda is clearly outlined at the commencement of all programmes. The clear and appropriate running of RM classes from an administrative and college perspective will also need to be evaluated on the basis of assessing **student disengagement**. The possibly current use of Q5 and Q6 forms can be used to assess student perspectives of the process. Additional surveys can be used to gauge the potential changes being proposed and the level of usage of the RSDF. Content of the Module will be discussed within the context of the outcomes for students and how their experience of the module will alter. Of course there are also administrative and teaching outcomes that will be affected by the content. The proposed structure will be the following.

*A Proposed Module Structure*

Common Methods for all Participants – weeks 1 to 8: Common activities to bring students toward the skills required for their Research Report. This will be assessed thought RSD based activities and 100% continuous assessment. This is a common eight weeks of delivery covering a broad spectrum of methods.

Specialist Disciplinary Linked Methods – weeks 9 to 12: These weeks will be covered by lecturers/researchers within the specific disciplines and tackle specific methodological concerns that are more closely linked to particular disciplines. For example on the M.Sc. in Advertising, brand recall, content analysis and semiotics might be more relevant to that particular cohort than studying econometrical models that might be more relevant to a student in the M.Sc. in Finance. The goal here might be to provide a suite of topics covering broader and specialist methods.

## Theoretical Framework and Discussion

From considering cohort commonality and student disengagement this paper proposes the use of the Research Skills Development Framework (RSDF) as a way to manage these issues. This section looks at these two theoretical constructs.

*The Assumption of Commonality*

This research project looks at the feasibility of delivering a standardised yet flexible RM Module across the College of Business (and potentially across the Institute). In the context of this goal many colleagues have concerns regarding the need for 'Disciplinary Commonality' among student cohorts; i.e. it is not possible to effectively deliver a standardised curriculum for students from disparate disciplines with distinct and diverse research traditions. This assumption leads to a groupthink within-paradigmatic perspective. Kuhn (1962) discusses what is understood as 'normal science' and that paradigms are judged within the rules of established disciplinary paradigms. For this reason students should be exposed to alternative approaches where methodological paradoxes are exposed. The cases presented in the full report illustrate how leading research universities teach RM as a common module to all students across multiple disciplines debunking the assumption that disciplinary commonality is required. The Research Skill Development Framework (RSDF), as illustrated below, can be used to show how many different forms of 'inquiry', across different disciplines, can be catered for within a core module. The RSDF also caters for multiple forms of research output, multiple research traditions and multiple research philosophies.

*Decreasing Student Disengagement*

Due to the frustrating aspects of the research process where leaps of faith are required and decisions are to be made without knowing what the outcome will bring, students tend to want to avoid these key decisions and not engage with the more critical or creative aspects of the RSDF (shown below). Harrington and Booth (2003) have written extensively on the concept of student disengagement. This fear can be overcome through a scaffolding process where steps are outlined and the ambiguity within these steps confronted as an aspect of the process rather than as something to be avoided. A specific aim of this research report is to consider how to decrease the prevalence of student disengagement. Two main recommendations are:

- to link ongoing module activities with different aspects of the RSDF and to illustrate this linkage so that students can see how their tasks are geared toward their research skill development over the course of their research
- to ensure that the specific Research Report from the research process is illustrated relative to the RSDF so that to complete the report the student will become aware of the skills required to do so.

The facet of inquiry and the autonomy of the student within their research project are both key to decreasing student disengagement. The next section discusses the RSDF in more detail.

*Overview of the Research Skills Development Framework*

The 'level of student autonomy' in arriving at a research topic represents an important consideration (Horan 2009).[2] This in conjunction with the second construct of 'facet of inquiry' delineates three different forms of research (Willison & O'Regan, 2007). It should be noted at this point that the research process requires you to oscillate across the different levels and requires different aspects of inquiry to be considered at different stages. If the RM process is considered from a skills development perspective all students should be brought from the top left hand side of the framework in undergraduate programmes to the bottom right hand side of the framework as the student progress to doctoral research. Students will be confronted with many of the issues raised in the middle of the framework as they move toward an 'open inquiry' where they synthesise, analyse and apply new knowledge.

Three broad scenarios, illustrating research across all disciplines are discussed in more detail in the full report.

- Closed Inquiry for Undergraduate Research Students – Developing Basic Research Skills
- Closed to Open Inquiry for M.Sc. Research Students
- Autonomous Open Inquiry for Ph.D. Students

*Closed Inquiry for Undergraduate Research Students – Developing Basic Research Skills:*

This form of inquiry is outside the scope of this particular project; however, a few items of note should be raised here. Research Methods for undergraduate research is not taught across the college in any consistent manner, however, Market Research and Statistical Course including SPSS and Critical Thinking are taught. The ideal here would be to have a consistent module that all undergraduate students would take to bring their research skills to Level 2 and at least to a facet of inquiry.

Why is this important? A standardised research skills module would thus differentiate itself from a RM Module at M.Sc. level and correctors' expectations could be managed more clearly with the RSDF rubric. Student without the skills (listed in Level 1 and 2) can be given a clear pathway with tasks to meet so that they come to an expected standard. Self assessment exercises can be conducted early in the research process to illustrate gaps in student knowledge.

*Closed to Open Inquiry for M.Sc. Research Students*

Whereas there is no distinct point on the RSDF that reflects M.Sc. level research at Level 9 NQAI, students are expected to move into Level 4 of the RSDF where they research at the level of a student initiated open inquiry within structured guidelines. At this level synthesis and analysis are required. The expectation to 'apply new knowledge' often does not occur as this is seen more at a Ph.D. standard. In any case from the diagram students are expected to move closer to the bottom right hand corner of the framework. Without the basic skills in Levels 1 and 2 it is hard to expect students commencing an M.Sc. to come up to speed. The phenomenon of 'student disengagement' in RM classes is widely recognised (Harrington & Booth 2003; Horan 2009). Through appropriate scaffolding and research skills development in undergraduate programmes gaps can be narrowed and disengagement minimised. Why is this important? Getting students to ask rigorous researchable questions based on new understandings (Level 3, Facet of Inquiry E) is an arduous process and students fail to timely develop their analytical skills.

[2] For more information see an earlier version of this paper at the DIT Arrow Repository http://arrow.dit.ie/buschmarcon/1/

RSD

# Research Skill Development Framework

A conceptual model to make explicit the incremental and cyclic development of student research skills

**LEVEL OF STUDENT AUTONOMY**

**FACET OF INQUIRY**

| FACET OF INQUIRY | | Level 1<br>*Students research at the level of a **closed inquiry*** and require a **high degree of structure/guidance*** | Level 2<br>*Students research at the level of a **closed inquiry*** and require **some structure/guidance*** | Level 3<br>*Students research **independently** at the level of a **closed inquiry**** | Level 4<br>*Students research at the level of an **open inquiry*** within **structured guidelines*** | Level 5<br>*Students research at the level of an **open inquiry*** within **self-determined guidelines** in accordance with the discipline* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A. *Students **embark** on inquiry and so **determine a need** for knowledge/ understanding* | *Curious* | Respond to questions/tasks arising explicitly from a closed inquiry. | Respond to questions/tasks required by and implicit in a closed inquiry. | Respond to questions/tasks generated from a closed inquiry. | Generate questions/aims/ hypotheses framed within structured guidelines. | Generate questions/aims/hypotheses based on experience, expertise and literature. |
| B. *Students **find/generate** needed information/ data using appropriate methodology* | *Determined* | Collect and record required information/data using a prescribed methodology from a prescribed source in which the information/ data is clearly evident. | Collect and record required information/data using a prescribed methodology from prescribed source/s in which the information/ data is not clearly evident. | Collect and record required information/data from self-selected sources using one of several prescribed methodologies. | Collect and record self-determined information/data from self-selected sources, choosing an appropriate methodology based on structured guidelines. | Collect and record self-determined information/data from self-selected sources, choosing or devising an appropriate methodology with self-structured guidelines. |
| C. *Students **critically evaluate** information/ data and the process to find/generate this information/data* | *Critical* | Evaluate information/data and the inquiry process using simple prescribed criteria. | Evaluate information/data and the inquiry process using prescribed criteria. | Evaluate information/data and the inquiry process using criteria related to the aims of the inquiry. | Evaluate information/data and the inquiry process comprehensively using self-determined criteria developed within structured guidelines. | Evaluate information/data and the inquiry process rigorously using self-generated criteria based on experience, expertise and literature. |
| D. *Students **organise** information collected/ generated and manage the research process* | *Organised* | Organise information/data and manage the research process according to a simple prescribed structure. | Organise information/data and manage the research process according to prescribed structures. | Organise information/data and manage the research process by adapting provided structures. | Organise information/data and manage the research process using self-determined structures that fit provided guidelines. | Organise information/data and manage the research process using self-determined protocols in accordance with the discipline. |
| E. *Students **synthesise** and **analyse** and **apply** new knowledge* | *Creative* | Synthesise and analyse information/ data to reproduce existing knowledge in prescribed formats. Ask questions of clarification/ curiosity. | Synthesise and analyse information/ data to reorganise existing knowledge in standard formats. Ask relevant, researchable questions. | Synthesise and analyse information/ data to construct emergent knowledge. Ask rigorous, researchable questions based on new understandings. | Synthesise, analyse and apply information/data to fill recognised knowledge gaps. | Synthesise, analyse and apply information/data to fill self-identified gaps or extend knowledge. |
| F. *Students **communicate** knowledge and the processes used to generate it, with an awareness of ethical, social and cultural issues* | *Persuasive* | Use mainly lay language and prescribed genre to demonstrate required knowledge and understanding for lecturer/teacher as the audience. | Use some discipline-specific language and prescribed genre to demonstrate self-selected knowledge and understanding from a stated perspective and for a specified audience. | Use mostly discipline-specific language and appropriate genre to demonstrate knowledge and understanding within a field from a scholarly perspective and for a specified audience. | Use the language of the discipline and appropriate genre to address knowledge and understanding gaps from several perspectives for a self-selected audience. | Use the language of the discipline, choosing appropriate genre to extend knowledge and understanding, from diverse perspectives for a range of audiences. |

*** closed – lecturer specified. open – student initiated. Lecturers and teachers determine scope of inquiry and standard required; student achievement determines the Level their research actually attains. For example, the provision of an open inquiry within structured guidelines (Level 4) in the First Year University context will see some students providing evidence of Level 1 attainment for a specific facet, with others demonstrating Level 2, Level 3 or Level 4, depending on their degree of rigour.**

Concept by John Willison and Kerry O'Regan, design by Peter Murdoch and Nik Cornish, Centre for Learning and Professional Development. Facets derived from ANZIIL(2004) standards, reworked using the Bloom, et al (1956) Taxonomy and implementation trials by Eleanor Peirce and Mario Ricci. 

*Autonomous Open Inquiry for Ph.D. Students*
Students move toward an open inquiry as a part of a M.Sc. programme. As in the M.Phil. some structure relating to research skill development reflecting academic requirements, i.e. research philosophy and the structure of argument, might be appropriate. Open inquiry (Levels 4 and 5) is more within the confines of the Ph.D. requiring groundwork. For this reason it is envisaged that all M.Phil. students would be required to sit the RM programme to as to ensure a basic standard. This should occur within a structure of delivery that ALL M.Sc. students are exposed to within a 'research clinic' meeting with the institutional requirements as outlined at the beginning of this report. This opens up an opportunity to deliver an M.Sc. in Research; a taught programme dedicated to research methods and all its facets of inquiry as illustrated in the cases presented in this report.

## Further Recommendations for the College and Institute

Long-term recommendations include the development of the M.Sc. in Research Methods. This will require the full development of other associated modules that may be run in blocks for all students doing an M.Phil. by research or even a Ph.D. This might also be run as a 'Research Clinic'. This clinic might help coordinate a wider initiative that looks at seminars and other events across the College of Business that a research related.

## Proposed Future Research

This project's rationale is broader and wider than the issue presented here as it provides a better understanding for the feasibility of teaching RM in a more formalised and standardised pattern across the college while fostering support for specialist and evolving methods within the module. Students will be guaranteed a consistency of experience while specialist areas will be catered for more effectively. Future research will provide a better understanding of potential cost savings while at the same time increasing the College's Research Profile. Spin off projects for M.Phil., Ph.D., Hothouse companies is also envisaged and the development of college and institutional capabilities to ensure that need to be researched and put on a solid footing. This project is a first incremental step toward positioning the College of Business, to cost effectively promote research and innovation through the delivery of a standardised RM module.

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