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*why is research
important for*
CAREERS WORK?



Fiona Christie, Senior Research Associate at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) and AGCAS Director of Research and Knowledge, and **Charlie Ball**, Head of Higher Education Intelligence at JISC, share their perspectives on how to get started with practitioner research and what to expect from the experience.



Research plays a crucial part in ensuring careers services respond knowledgeably to dynamic and uncertain contexts. It can help make meaning of the world we live and work in, and improve what we do for the students and graduates that we support. Doing research and/or being research-informed can contribute to a transformation of who we are as professionals.

Well-planned research that addresses specific questions contributes to our expertise. Students and graduates, and the other stakeholders we work with, rely on us to draw on trusted sources. Most of us will have entered this field with vast amounts of relevant knowledge. However, this can date quickly.

Many people associate careers research with large-scale surveys and labour market intelligence. Of course, big quantitative research projects are important, but research can be about many other issues. Careers practitioners are well placed to do research, due to our access to potential participants and networks. Our action-oriented priorities often mean we are pragmatic in what we focus upon; doing research that aligns with work or organisational priorities can be sensible as long as this does not compromise criticality.

Some practitioners will undertake research either on their own (as part of a Master's or

a PhD) or in collaboration with others. Many practitioners will not have time to develop their own research projects, but may have options to collaborate with academics who share professional interests. Engaging in CPD, reading academic publications and publicly available reports, or following media stories all require individuals to think as researchers; at its heart, this means being open to new ideas and viewing information presented critically.

FIONA:
PRACTITIONER RESEARCH
– QUESTIONS TO GET
YOU STARTED



What are your questions?

What is it you really want to find out from your research? Move from a broad topic to specific questions. It can be useful to have one big question that you want to answer, with sub-questions.

What assumptions influence your research?

Before you start planning any data collection or design, think about how you situate your research. Do labour market studies, management, psychology, sociology, social policy, education, career guidance, or geography influence your ideas? Be candid about your bias and include references.

Is your research ethical?

Practitioners are action-oriented and used to working fast. However, if you want your research to have rigour and credibility you need to give time for research ethics and project management. Every university will have its own procedures to follow.

What is your philosophical approach?

There are two broad camps – positivist and constructivist. To generalise, positivists tend to orientate to quantitative data and seek provable findings; constructivists explore questions that are unlikely to have clear answers, and tend to favour qualitative datasets.

What methods will you use?

Methods used may include interviews, surveys, case studies, focus groups or document analysis. Whatever method(s) you use, be able to justify what samples, participants and sources you have chosen.

How to make sense of your data?

Once you have designed a project and collected data, how will you analyse it effectively? Do you want to do statistical analysis with quantitative data? Are you going to do a thematic or discourse analysis, with qualitative data?



CHARLIE:
**MANAGING PRACTITIONER
RESEARCH PROJECTS
– BUGBEARS**



Extend your timeframe

Take your project timetable – and then assume everything will take longer than you think. New researchers (and experienced ones!) always underestimate how long your institution's ethical approval process can take.

Define your research question

Make sure you have a well-defined research question. It is very easy to be side-tracked, and the more vague your research question, the more vague your data will be. 'What factors affect employability?', for example, is a poorly defined question and you will run around in circles chasing a conclusion.

Set realistic sample sizes

A huge reason why new researchers get into difficulties is due to sample sizes. Recruiting a sample is hard; getting them all to show up is harder. New researchers severely underestimate how much data an interview can produce, and then they underestimate how much effort is required to transcribe it.

Make analysis match data

If you have a small, qualitative sample, it can be tempting to start to do some 'stats' on the findings. For example, it is worth capturing that 10 of your 30-strong sample like cheese, 10 love cheese and 10 are barbarians who dislike cheese – it adds context to your qualitative findings exploring the effects of cheese on employability. What is not so good is you saying '30% of the sample love cheese'. Percentages are for when you have larger samples. In a 30-strong sample, the important findings are qualitative and using percentages can mislead.

Things will go wrong

Research is very rewarding, but it is also hard work. You might not be able to get your sample in time. You might not be able to find

crucial references. Someone else might have done something that looks similar and got different results. It is OK if it is not going well, and talking it through with other researchers will help. They will have all been there.

Reap the rewards

Presenting your work to an appreciative audience and knowing it will have an impact is an amazing feeling. Producing findings from your own research and telling people about them is rewarding – and your chance to learn more from your audience.



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