How to start a Research Project

UniSA student panel

Part 2 (of 2)

Ok, great, thank you Nathan. This is a question for Cassie. How did you approach and communicate with organisations and professionals?

I think this is a really good question because a lot of you may need to contact organisations or individuals who are experts in the area that you are interested in. And I think the best way, sort of I guess, the most common way at the moment would be to send an email to that organisation or if you know a specific person within that organisation that you’re interested in speaking with then an initial email just stating what your research interests are and what you’re hoping to get out of it is, but, I would sort of say send that initial email, but don’t bombard people with specific questions in that initial email, just speaking from someone who’s received those kind of emails because a lot of people are interested in sleep research - which is awesome - but if you can have a phone call or face-to-face sort of semi-structured interview with someone, then I think you are going to get a lot more out of that and as the person providing the information, it’s a lot easier to deliver that information than to try and interpret a bunch of questions in an email. So I think, and if people don’t write back to your email, then I’d say follow up on it, try and find a phone number that you can follow up with because a lot of people are busy and might sort of skip over an email, so don’t give up if there’s someone you really want to talk to, who’s the expert in your field.

Great, thank you. Any other, anything else you wanted to say Felicity on that?

Yeah, I just agree with the face-to-face, you can get just so much more out of face-to-face interviews, not only the verbal communication but also the body language and if someone doesn’t understand what you are asking, you can clarify then and there, so you can’t do that with email. And, I just think if you, even if you can give them a phone call, they are more likely to answer the phone and respond to you cause emails can get ignored as well.

Great, thank you. Question for Nathan, can you give us some tips for gathering data for research please?

Alright, so the first thing is you need to have, a notebook that you dedicate to this project and write down everything that you can because you don’t know what is going to be important to you at the end when you, when you are writing your project up or preparing for this expo. So, that’s number one. There’s of course many different ways to collect data that are dependent on the type of project that you’re doing. I would say that the more, maybe the, what will be any way that you can make it into personal communication with others, that will be more interesting for you rather than say you could of course look online for data sets of what relating to whatever you’re looking at, and collect data that way. But if you can talk to people and record parts of conversations, collect data that way, as far as I’m, I feel, I’m very scientific, so I’m always looking at the science, often relates to mathematics, often relates to numbers, so I’m recording numbers, recording values and, but that doesn’t necessarily relate to the way that you guys are doing things. Then of course when you come to the end of everything, you will have to plot your data in some way, and you’ll have to some spend time to figure out way, the best way to represent your data, and what you’ve, and all that, all that you’ve gathered, and probably some statistics will help you with that too.

Do you have anything more to say Cassie on that?

Just a word about surveys as well, which probably a lot of you will use as survey technique to try and get as many respondents as possible, so obviously if you’re doing interviews, then that limits the number of people you can collect data from, but if you’re putting together surveys, survey, it is important to think about the questions that you’re asking, so I would advise to sort of do what we call a pilot survey where you can ask just a couple of your friends to fill out the survey and see whether they understand the questions that you’ve asked and whether they’re responding, they’re interpreting them the same way you want them to be interpreted. Also, if you’re collecting data through surveys, you can also use a lot of validated scales. So what that means is scales that are used by scientists and researchers which have been used and been shown to sort of collect the exact data that you’re looking for so, if you’re looking at sort of mental health, there is a lot of scales on depression and anxiety, in the sleep world there is a lot of validated scales on sleepiness and daytime sleepiness and things like that, so depending on what your topic is, I’m sure there are scales that you should kind of, if you’re speaking to experts they will be able to let you know which is the best approach.

Great, Just on surveys as well, the great thing about surveys is they can be internet based, so that means you can have access to a lot more people with a lot more different opinions, so there is lots of different website, a really good one is survey monkey, and you can even talk to people internationally with that website, so it’s a really great way to get your data, but I think the important thing is to base the way you collect your data on your research question, cause it going to be dependent on what you are trying to find out, so don’t try, just try and do a survey for anything obviously, if you’re trying to measure something, you’re going to have to do it differently, really look at your research question, and think about what is the best way I can get this data.

Great, thank you. Just heading back to Nathan now for the last question, once you’ve made some findings, how do you tell other people about them?

So, I would say that when you get to the end of your project, where you are at the end is totally different, everything that you’ve learned then, your mind set will be totally different then than where you are now, and the people that you’re talking to are more in the shoes of where you are now, so you need to think about the steps that you went through to get to, to where you will be at the end of your project, and when you’re getting ready to present it so that you can bring any sort of, person along with you, tell the story of how you, how you did this project, why did you do this project, what did you do, and what did you find out. So, it’s, you need to step back from your, from what you’ve done, so that you can realise everything that was, that took place and everything that you learned so that you can show that passion that you’ve developed over that whole project, show that passion towards, give that passion to somebody else and share it.

Great, thank you, anything more Cassie on that?

I would just say make sure you’re reporting your findings in a way that’s relevant to the person who’s reading them, so your audience. So that might be, I’m assuming your teachers, but again just reiterating the point that you will be the expert in this topic at the end of your Research Project, but you still need to use language that the person reading it can understand because you now know a lot more about it, but just try to step through your results to someone who is not sort of within that project. Also there is heaps of different ways that you can present your information, I’m not sure exactly what your presentations requirements are, but you may be giving a talk in which case obviously PowerPoint is an awesome way to help illustrate your talk. I would say don’t go crazy on the animations, try and keep it simple, and not too much text on the slides. Another way to present information is a poster. And a poster might sounds like sort of, something you would do in primary school, but actually use posters in, for conferences at the highest academic level, in international conferences, and it’s a really great way to sort of, present your key finding from your, from your projects.