



Options for Deployment of ESS Methodology Components for Contemporary Instruction on Business Research Methods

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Abstract

The paper suggests an overview of the options for deployment of appropriate methodological tools developed in the framework of the European Social Survey programme for the goals of contemporary instruction on Business Research Methods. This course provides specific knowledge and skills to students in Business Administration/Management programmes related to the design, organization, data collection, data analysis, and reporting of analytical results from business research activities. One of the major methodological approaches to primary data collection and analysis is the questionnaire survey method. From this point of view, the methodological achievements of the European Social Survey, being a large scale European Research Infrastructure, can be utilized for the goals of teaching Business Research Methods in any of the main areas of its methodological knowledge: design and content of questionnaires, organization of data collection procedures (with specific focus on the sampling methods), conducting the data collection work (including the interviewing process), data processing, and preparation of survey data for statistical analysis. In any of these methodological subfields the achievements of the European Social Survey programme can be successfully implemented in order to provide a contemporary high standard of teaching Business Research Methods to Business Management students at all levels: undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate. Particular aspects of the methodology for conducting Business Research can be also adapted to teaching in an e-learning environment.

Keywords: *European Social Survey, survey methodology, business research methods.*

1. Introduction

Teaching of Business Research Methods (BRM) faces different problems related to the provision of appropriate balance between generic research issues, quantitative research methods and qualitative methodologies. In its effort to search for solutions of some of these problems the current study outlines opportunities for using particular methodological achievements of the European Social Survey (ESS) programme. ESS is established in London at the National Centre for Social Research in 2001 and since 2003 its Headquarters are hosted by City University of London, UK. Since its first wave (Round 1: 2002-2003) it arranges the productions and disseminates cross-national data concerning individual attitudes and viewpoints toward European societies, politics, and human behaviour.

By 2-year waves about 40 thousand face-to-face interviews are organized within the ESS programme across Europe focusing on a range of social topics. It is important to note that ESS data is provided to research community, students, media, and other interested users free of charge. The datasets as well as methodological metadata for eight waves conducted up to year 2017 can be retrieved and analysed using statistical software, or can be analysed using ESS online tool (currently, Round 9 data 2018-2019 is under preparation for public release). In 2013 ESS was awarded a status of ERIC (European Research Infrastructure Consortium) and as such incorporates over 35 European countries [ESShis].

The challenge to the educators in BRM is to select appropriate examples of practical implementations of research designs and methodologies when dealing with survey research, including e-learning tools. In the specialized literature and many textbooks the research principles and techniques are presented in a too general and conceptual form that discourages the students and induces a loss of learning focus [Benson]. The main point in this respect here is to provoke the interest of the students in the application of different methods of research practice as well as to overcome their hesitation to approach the subject due to worries about its complicated matter. This approach provides opportunities for development of personal transferrable skills that can be utilized also within the learning process in disciplines like organizational behaviour, marketing management, project management, etc.

2. Business research methods: nature of the subject

Business Research Methods as a discipline covers a wide range of issues related to the core elements of business research process. A course in BRM emphasises on four general stages of the

research process that typically should provide analytical information in support of managerial decision making (fig.1).

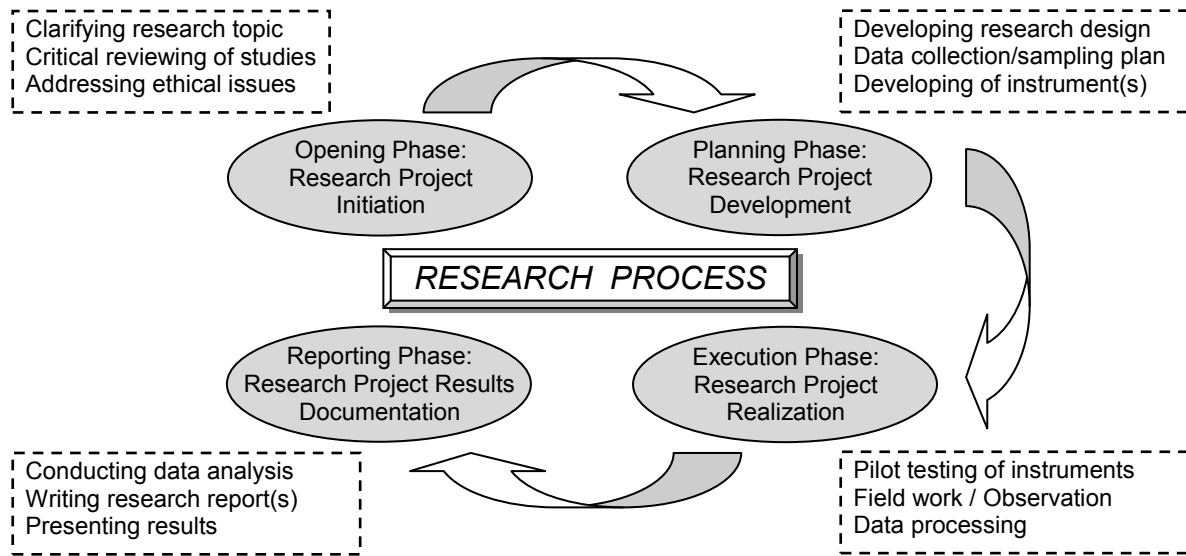


Figure 1. Business research process (adapted from [Saunders])

Generally, the BRM course curriculum suggests a selection of methods for primary data provision as well as methods for secondary analysis of available data. Usually, such a course includes an appropriate combination of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods approaches. Nowadays, there is a strong demand from business practice for training of experts that are able to apply contemporary methodologies for business research. From this point of view, an academic course in BRM is responsible for the preparation of the students for their future career development based on professional competences acquired through practical learning. Such experts must have reliable knowledge and capability to develop a business research proposal, to design a research plan, to conduct the steps of its implementation, to derive analytical result, and to present them in a clear and understandable manner through appropriate reporting. Research competences are considered also essential for the successful development of student research projects required by particular courses within the business management curriculum – undergraduate or graduate – and especially for the development of a Master thesis [Hoidn].

3. Teaching research methods problems

Teaching research methods is conducted according to various learning models. The traditional approach can be determined as a “transmission” one – it assumes that the knowledge is transferred by the lecturer to the students [Robinson]. On the contrary, an opposite approach – known as “research-teaching” nexus – is based on learning-by-doing as a process of knowledge construction which highlights a contextual learning process [Simons], e.g. involving problem-based learning, case methods, experiential studying, team working, exercises and role plays, computer-based simulations, etc. In this respect, the major goal of this contemporary approach is to keep the students’ attention focused, being an active part of the learning process through engaging them in particular research activities [Wagner].

One of the problems in teaching BRM is that students’ experience could be quite disorientating in a sense that the concepts appear to be too complicated and abstract – e.g. they hardly get orientation in terms like “epistemology” or “phenomenology” [Cowie]. It is necessary for the lecturers to stimulate the students in doing action research that assumes a “cycle of inquiry” which reflects a process starting with problem identification; collection of information about the problem; organizing, processing, and analysing the data; interpreting the empirical (feedback) results; outlining a plan to address the problem on the basis of the findings and achievements of the research. The experience obtained by practical involvement of survey data in business management studies shows that learning from research experience performs quite encouraging for the students. It contributes for the building of analytical and reporting skills through preparation and presentation of survey results [Kuzmanova].



4. ESS: methodological tools and web resources

Using ESS methodologies and practical experience definitely provides valuable resources and appropriate study environment for learning key components of BRM process. They can be allocated to any of its major methodological areas, namely, the four key elements of the ESS Specifications: preparing the survey instruments (questionnaires), including translation and adaptation to foreign languages; developing research design concerning the data collection, including sampling; performing the data collection, including primary data processing; preparation of datasets for thematic analysis, including user-friendly online delivery.

The source questionnaire development in ESS is based on high methodological standards that pursue cross-country comparativeness of the national survey results. The variety of questions' formulations provides a rich set of sustainable techniques developed by empirical social researchers, many of which can serve as templates and "good practices" also relevant for the business research goals. This is guaranteed by the use of precisely formulated questions which are designed to capture particular aspects of the topic of research. For example, ESS rotating module "Personal and Social Wellbeing" contains questions that can assist the study of job satisfaction (table 1).

Table 1. ESS questionnaire instrument examples [ESS-b]

Question	Structure of answers	
All things considered, how satisfied are you with your present job?	Extremely dissatisfied - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 - Extremely satisfied 66 Not applicable 77 Refusal 88 Don't know 99 No answer	
In general I feel very positive about myself.	1 Agree strongly 2 Agree 3 Neither agree nor disagree 4 Disagree	5 Disagree strongly 7 Refusal 8 Don't know 9 No answer
To what extent you feel that people treat you with respect?	Not at all - 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 - A great deal 7 Refusal 8 Don't know 9 No answer	
Little chance to show how capable I am	1 Agree strongly 2 Agree 3 Neither agree nor disagree 4 Disagree	5 Disagree strongly 7 Refusal 8 Don't know 9 No answer
How much a person is or is not like you? * <i>Being very successful is important to her/him.</i> * <i>She/he hopes people will recognise her/his achievements.</i>	1 Very much like me 2 Like me 3 Somewhat like me 4 A little like me 5 Not like me 6 Not like me at all	7 Refusal 8 Don't know 9 No answer

In respect of the research design detailed ESS specifications are developed in order to ensure high quality and accuracy of survey data. Students in BRM can benefit substantially from the standards applied for the data collection plan, some of which are [ESS-b]: setting of response rate target (70% as a general target); non-contact rate target (3% maximum); detailed briefing and instruction of interviewers in face-to-face sessions (strict focus on the personnel); restricted interviewer workload (maximum 48 sample units gross); interviewer call schedule (4 contact attempts minimum, among which at least 1 in the evening and 1 at the weekend); specific contact forms implemented (to record and document data about the fieldwork processes); quality control back-checks on completed interviews and ineligible cases (minimum 10%); planning of a close monitoring of the fieldwork progress.

ESS sampling strategy provides practical examples to BRM students about the scientific-based design and execution of representative sampling plans. ESS sampling requirements are also defined in the methodological specifications and implement several key principles, e.g. [ESS-b]:

- a sample must be representative of all persons aged 15 and over, resident within private households in each country, regardless of their nationality, citizenship or language;
- strict selection of individuals by random probability methods at every stage;
- encouraging the utilization of sampling frames of individuals, households and addresses;
- minimum "effective achieved" sample size of 1,500 (or 800 in countries with ESS populations of less than 2 million);



- quota sampling not allowed at any stage;
- substitution of non-responding households or individuals (whether 'refusals', 'non-contacts' or 'ineligibles') not allowed at any stage.

Finally, the principles of construction and operation of ESS Data Archive are oriented to provide the users (social researchers) with harmonised and standardised data files. Students in BRM can learn much from the international standards implemented in applied social research that emphasize on the accuracy and consistency of the collected data. Detailed editing of standardized data at the Archive is carefully performed. An important methodological document in this respect is the ESS Data Protocol which contains key specifications and strives to attain cross-national consistency in data production and delivery (e.g. it provides specifications for the data coding, the generation of the standardized data files, principles of variable definitions and classifications, as well as additional electronic resources). Its most important segment suggests a comprehensive coding plan that defines the variable names, categories and coding of the answers (numeric or alpha-numeric codes), etc. A special topic of interest is also the methodologies for providing reliable cross-national research with data from different language and cultural environments (which is important in cross-cultural organizational or marketing research as well).

5. Conclusions

This paper provided a general overview of some opportunities for utilization within the instruction of BRM courses of relevant methodological resources developed in the research framework of the ESS programme. It attempts to contribute to the efforts for bringing in the “action research” principles into the university curricula as well as the full engagement of students into active learning processes. In this process the instructor plays a core role which requires a development of specific knowledge and competences to implement successfully such a pedagogical approach. The instructor needs to be able to draw the students' attention to particular elements of the research methodology, however, using appropriate examples, cases, and learning points. The expectation is that the current study will stimulate the interest in ESS resources with a goal to enrich the knowledge base of BRM. The methodology of ESS can reveal the overall logic of the research process to the students and can assist them to prepare for practical research activity. In this line, the current study aims to encourage BRM lecturers and tutors to explore the variety of relevant resources of ESS and to stimulate the subsequent utilization of these opportunities by students enrolled in BRM courses.

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