

Abdelfattah Mostafa
Getting started- Assignment #1 report
25 October 2023

Objective

The purpose of this assignment is to choose a dissertation project and elaborate an understanding of how the researcher wrote their dissertation in a report and a presentation.

Selected dissertation

- Title: Information Acquisition in International Business: Innovation in a small Biotechnology firm
- Author: Teea Vilhelmiina Mäkelä.
- Adviser: Stuart Macdonald
- Unit: Department of Management and International Business
- Published: School of Business, Aalto university, 2013

Approach

This report is answering the main assignment questions in order. The answers are found through the reading of the dissertation and through an email interview with the author.

What was the researcher's main research task and question?

The researcher's main question as described in her dissertations is "How does a small firm acquire information for innovation in international business?". The author saw their task to answer this question by:

- first laying out an understanding of the industry that the research subject is operating in, through review of literature
- and then elaborating a review of the perspectives on information acquisition and its elements
- Defining a research site at which the study will be performed and explaining the reasons for the this choice
- one of the main tasks can be identified as data collection through the interviews of different persons of interests at the research site
- and finally analyzing the gathered data through an empirical study and presenting the results

Description of the phases of writing the thesis over time.

The author has identified interviews to be her method of data collection. Specifically, episodic interviews was the method of interviews that was used, that was, in essence a mix of structured interviews and narrative interviews. In practice that meant that the research had to conduct four rounds of interviews over the period of 2005-2007 for the first three rounds and the last round took place in 2011.

Based on the structure of the thesis, it can be seen that the phases of writing the thesis over time were as follows:

- Literature review for the traditional biotechnology industry
- Literature review for the modern biotechnology industry
- Review of perspectives of information acquisition in international business

In parallel or after the above steps the work towards data gathering, and analysis was maybe performed in the following order:

- Selection, analysis and justification of choice of the research site
- Identifying the data collection method:
 - Choosing interviews as data collection method
 - and defining the type and methodology of the interviews through literature review to identify the possible and feasible methodologies
 - setting agreements with persons of interests on the interviews processes
- Preparing interview questions based on the research question and objectives
- Collection of data:
 - First as raw data from initial rounds of interviews
 - Coding of the gathered data based on the selected analysis method
 - Categorization of the data from the initial interviews
 - Forming questions for the final interviews
 - Coding and categorization of the data from the final interviews
 - Analysis of the overall data and of the narratives derived from the data
 - Elaborating the results section; first on the information collected and second on the narratives established

- Elaborating the reflections that will form the conclusions section as the final part of the dissertation

Why is the dissertation like it is? The researcher's and the adviser's view

The researcher chose to write a monograph as she wanted to challenge herself to create a single piece of work that could form a single coherent whole. The researcher found that this was more challenging than writing a series of essays or articles, where one could focus more briefly on a more limited topic and then loosely tie the essays or articles together. However, the researcher would not say that this was a strategically wise choice, as it indeed was more challenging, took more time, and resulted in fewer publications, which is always bad for an academic career.

It is clear that the researcher chose interviews as the main form of collecting data, would the researcher do it differently e.g. if the researcher had more insight already in the industry. Why did the researcher choose an interview as a form of research?

The researcher said: "Again, I was too ambitious". The researcher's main topic of interest was knowledge, and it quickly became very clear from literature that knowledge as a concept is extremely complex and challenging. Other disciplines explore knowledge and define it in various ways. It seemed to the researcher that especially much of the business literature defined knowledge in an extremely simplistic manner in order to operationalise it for quantitative research, yet at the same time missing out on much of the complexity of the concept and the phenomenon. The researcher wanted to explore the concept more widely and deeply, allowing for aspects of the dynamics around it to emerge more fully than would have been possible with quantitative research that would have required operationalizing it quite strictly.

As with the monograph form, the researcher questions whether she would make this choice again, as she believes it was not strategically the optimal one, as accepting a simplified definition of knowledge would have saved lots of time, energy, and conducting the research using quantitative methodology would have made it easier to publish and would have made it more highly regarded in the eyes of many, as the researcher believes that qualitative research tends not to be valued as much as quantitative research. So looking back, the researcher would have made easier and more strategic decisions that would have saved time and work and been favorable for her career.

Besides interviews what were the most important source of literature/information?

In terms of theoretical literature, The researcher found the journal Research Policy, as well as literature on institutional economics and Schumpeterian economics to be highly useful. In order to place the research into context, the researcher not that she also needed to gain an understanding of the scientific field in which the business was established, this being biotechnology. Here, books covering the field were the best information sources.

Overall, how was the researcher's writing strategy? Consistent over everyday for example, or was it in sessions that were over a month or so?

The researcher's writing strategy was extremely iterative, where the researcher made synopses of the relevant literature as well as drafts on relevant topics, then created syntheses of the literature and finally final versions of the chapters. In the final version, an extreme amount of writing was omitted in order to make the writing clear and concise. The researcher followed the adage of "How can I know what I think before I write it?", using writing as a tool for thinking. The researcher believes this may have been overused.

For the interviews, the researcher transcribed them, then wrote them up using thematic analysis, and then drafted analyses across the interviews. These drafts also underwent several iterations until they were clear and concise enough to satisfy the (final) advisor.

What made it possible to finish the project (successfully)? Specially in the researcher's case it was done in different periods with, what seemed to be interviews with longer periods in between.

Two things were especially important to carry out the project:

- Access to a suitable case study company, which was challenging to obtain as I was asking questions on topics of such strategic relevance that most companies did not want to disclose such information;
- The secret to successfully finishing the project was changing advisors. I cannot stress enough the importance of having the right advisor. My project was seriously delayed by a wrong advisor; it was only when the right one (with the right expertise, interest, motivation and attitude) was found that I was able to clear the hurdles and come to a successful finish. So if I were to give anyone a single piece of advice, it would be to choose your advisor carefully and not to hesitate changing advisors if the project does not seem to be advancing with the one you have at the moment. The advisor is key.

Note: This interview was conducted in October 2021 and was not presented.