

RELEVANT TO ALL STUDENTS

Getting to grips with research in your RAP

Reviewing the causes of failure after each submission period of the *Research and Analysis Project* (RAP) confirms that students have problems with the research process. This can be seen in students' reflections on the research process mentioned in their skills and learning statements. 'Research' is viewed as remote – the domain of academics rather than practitioners – surrounded by a certain mystique. For many students it is a new experience, unlike taking exams with which they are more familiar.

In such circumstances it is perhaps not too surprising that many of you have some difficulty in getting started.

The results of these problems can best be understood by comparing and contrasting 'good' projects with 'weak' projects.

Good projects are characterised by:

- specific and achievable report objectives
- a logical structure to the research report, underpinned and guided by a clearly explained overall research approach
- a systematic approach to information gathering, relevant to the topic issues in the organisation studied and the report objectives
- an analytical and evaluative approach to information gathered based on integrating and applying knowledge of relevant theories/concepts/models from accountancy and business to meet the original research report objectives.

In sharp contrast, failed projects reveal:

- either no objectives or objectives that are too general or unrealistic given the constraints
- an absence of a clear statement of overall research approach and inappropriate report structure and content
- the information gathering is haphazard, not appropriate to the issues in the organisation studied or research report objectives
- the information gathered, including that derived from relevant academic theories/models, etc, is described rather than applied to analyse and evaluate the issues in the organisation studied in order to draw conclusions and make recommendations relevant to the research report objectives.

Given that some of these problems exist, how can students learn to get to grips with research and therefore improve their chances of success in their RAP?

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1 Demystifying research

A useful first step is to demystify research and the research process as it relates to your RAP.

In everyday use of language, to research means to investigate, to enquire, to look into, to explore, to find out. If you think of researching as investigating, then you would conduct some research if you were about to buy a car. This includes deciding on your requirements such as size, economy, reliability, the price range, etc. You might study reviews of selected models in the motoring press to assist you in evaluating alternatives. Finally, after test-driving some of them, you would buy the car that best met your specification and which – in your judgment – represented the best overall ‘deal’.

There are some similarities between this everyday view of research as an investigative process, involving a number of stages or phases, and the RAP.

The RAP is an example of applied business research, with a focus on business problems and issues set in the context of a single organisation. The purpose of applied business research is to contribute to the solution of that problem or issue, or increase understanding of its significance. It may result in certain recommendations being made to an appropriate person in the organisation studied. There is a highly practical and problem-solving aspect of such work, with some similarities to a consultancy project.

However, there is also an academic purpose underpinning the design of the RAP, namely to ensure that certain transferable or graduate skills are mastered, demonstrated by achieving a pass.

These skills include those of:

- completing an independent research-based project
- information gathering and referencing appropriately
- effective written and oral presentation
- using information technology
- problem solving, analysis and evaluation
- self-managed learning.

All of the above are assessed, primarily in the Research Report, while reflecting on the learning experience of completing the project is assessed through the completed *Skills and Learning Statement*, the second component of the RAP.

Applied business research requires the use of a systematic investigation process. The key word here is ‘systematic’, which implies that it is planned and methodical, in line with established research methods and takes account of other published work in the relevant field.

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The practical implications for the student are that there must be a systematic approach to:

- information gathering
- interpretation and analysis of information gathered
- an overall evaluation that provides either answers to, or increased understanding of, the original problem/issue studied.

2 Understanding the importance of the overall research approach.

In the published guidance on the RAP the requirement to ‘explain your overall research approach’ causes some confusion among students. The further explanation that it is ‘the framework... developed to meet your project objectives and answer your research questions’ does not seem to clarify matters sufficiently either. So what exactly does it mean and why is it important?

It is best understood as the underlying structure that shapes and guides your research report. It links a statement of what it is you are trying to find out to an outline of the methods you have used to provide the required answers. It sets out a series of important parts of the research process. These, related to the RAP, are set out below.

- i. The original problem or issue – defined by the approved topic you select – in the context of your chosen organisation.
- ii. The specific research questions and report objectives that you set and propose to answer or meet.
- iii. Reviewing relevant literature on accounting and business concepts/theories/models in order to determine which you will use, and their limitations, to develop your understanding of the issues in the context of your chosen organisation.
- iv. Methods of information gathering you use, including a discussion of the limitations of your information gathering, and any ethical issues arising and how they were resolved.
- v. The analysis and evaluation you conduct, based on the business/accounting techniques, etc, applied to provide answers to your research questions and meet your stated report objectives.
- vi. Conclusions, and any relevant recommendations of practical benefit, arising from your report.

Although this explanation makes the whole research process seem orderly and sequential, in practice it is likely to be more tangled and disorganised. However, it is helpful to establish a plan of how to proceed **before** you begin.

Try to write a brief statement outlining your proposed approach before you commence your detailed information gathering, that is after 2(iii) and certainly before stage 2(iv) above. Then ask yourself these important questions:

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- Will this approach enable me to answer the research questions and meet the report objectives I have set?
- If not, do I need to gather more information from a wider range of secondary sources, or conduct some primary research, or both?
- Or do I need to review and revise my research questions or project report objectives?

Once you are reasonably satisfied that you are on the right lines, you can proceed further with your investigation. Thinking clearly about your overall research approach and writing a clear statement about it will act as a guide through the research process, which will shape and structure what you do and how you do it.

In addition, a clear statement about your overall research approach enables the marker to see that you have adopted a systematic and appropriate approach to meeting your report objectives.

3 Understanding the RAP constraints – and being realistic

This is a 6,500 word report, assessed against specific criteria, with a recommended report structure and content. Currently, there are 20 approved topic areas that form the basis of your RAP. These are drawn from the syllabuses for Papers F1 to F9, of which you will be familiar to some extent.

Once you have chosen a topic area, your RAP must then focus on one organisation, which again you will choose. Your project research must be a business analysis and evaluation – not just a financial analysis – of the topic area issues in your chosen organisation. Your conclusions and any appropriate recommendations must answer the specific research questions and meet the project objectives you set. These are all constraints that you must take fully into account in conducting your research and writing up your research report.

The following suggestions should be helpful to you.

(a) Set realistic, achievable research questions and report objectives. You are not producing a Masters or Doctoral dissertation, so limit yourself to what you can achieve within the constraints of the word count, structure and content of the research report. Many students do not do this, and produce either a long list of objectives, or no objectives at all – both of which can lead to failure.

The criteria for effective objectives are sometimes defined as SMART objectives – that is:

- **S**pecific
- **M**easurable
- **A**chievable
- **R**ealistic and
- **T**imebound

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It is just as well to think about these criteria in relation to the objectives you propose to set. Do discuss your proposed objectives with your mentor before you begin.

(b) There is a recommended structure and content – so follow it, and take account of the suggested word count in each of the three sections.

The benefit of following the recommended structure and content is that it acts as a checklist and reflects the assessment criteria. Many students still continue to ignore the recommended structure and content, and substitute one of their own. While this is not a reason for failure in itself, it often leads to certain important requirements being omitted from the report, which **is** a cause of failure. Remember also that presentation is important, so check your report carefully for style, use of language, clarity of expression, appropriate use of tables, diagrams, graphics and appendices – and make sure you stick to the limit of 6,500 words.

(c) The nature and type of information you need to gather will be determined by your choice of project topic area and the specific research questions and report objectives you set. Depending on the specific research project objectives you set in the topic area, all of the approved topics could be addressed using secondary sources of information only. **There is no requirement to conduct primary research although, in selecting your topic and organisation and setting your objectives, you must consider whether or not you will need some primary information.**

You do need to look at a wide range of information sources, including online sources. A common error is to rely far too much on a single source of information – for example, company annual reports, without considering additional information sources, such as analysts' reports, the financial press, consumer journals, and so on, for an alternative viewpoint.

You must consult academic sources in order to judge which accounting and business concepts, theories, models and techniques are likely to be of use – both in understanding related issues in your chosen organisation, and also in analysing and evaluating all the other information you have gathered.

A business relevant 'model' in this context is a representation of part of either what may be termed as the business system or business processes. Its purpose is to facilitate understanding, analysis and assessment of that part of the business system or business processes to which it relates. There are a variety of such models or tools that can be used.

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For example:

- a PEST model identifies those factors that shape and influence the business environment in which the organisation operates
- a SWOT identifies the key issues emerging from an examination of the organisation's internal strengths and weaknesses in the context of the opportunities and threats which its business environment presents
- PORTER'S FIVE FORCES identifies those factors that determine the level of competition in the industry in which the organisation exists, and thus the key aspects of the competitive environment facing an organisation
- the VALUE CHAIN model enables an organisation to analyse and assess its competitive strength.

A common fault here is to outline and describe a number of these models without discussing their limitations or applying them to increase understanding of relevant issues in the organisation and its business environment. Neither are they used in analysing and evaluating the information gathered in order to judge how well the original report objectives have been met. The lesson here is to use a smaller number of relevant theories/models, etc, but to discuss their limitations and apply them both to evaluating the issues in the organisation studied, and in explaining your findings and drawing conclusions related to your report objectives.

Remember also that a common cause of failure relates to shortcomings in both analysis/evaluation and information gathering/referencing. This arises when a lot of information – not referenced in the text – is included in Section 3 of the report: Results, Analysis, Conclusions, and Recommendations.

For example, a detailed SWOT is listed without any referencing at all – there are no sources shown regarding any of the information presented. In some cases, parts have been extracted from an annual report from various sources, but none have been properly referenced in the text. When this occurs, you must realise that you are likely to be failed both in the technical and professional skill of 'analysis/evaluation' on the grounds that it is not possible to judge where the information used comes from, **and** in the graduate skill of referencing.

Referencing is an important graduate skill. It acknowledges the work of others, thus avoiding plagiarism, and provides evidence of the extent of your reading. It also enables markers to check cited sources and evaluate your interpretation of them, if necessary. You are required to reference information sources in your report, both in the text and in a comprehensive list of references.

d. If you do decide that you must conduct some **primary research** in your chosen organisation, then there are a number of additional points to watch, including:

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- you must obtain permission from a relevant senior person in that organisation. Students often experience difficulties in accessing the information required from the organisation they select, so you need to clarify what you need and obtain the appropriate permission as soon as possible
- you must also explain the methods used, sample size and sampling strategy, and comment on the response rate
- finally, you need to discuss the ethical issues involved in conducting your primary research and how you resolved them.

You should note that where questionnaires or interviews are used, you must include a copy of the questionnaire used, a summary of responses, a list of interview questions, plus details of interviewees and a summary of the main points in their responses within the appendices of the report.

You should then extract significant points for comment and as support for your analysis in the main body of your report. Remember also to be aware of the limitations of your information gathering in primary research. Given your likely sample size and response rate – and the word count limits of the RAP – you can probably only draw tentative conclusions from your primary research. These constraints generally mean that a complex statistical methodology is not likely to be appropriate. Again, this reinforces the need to set limited and realistic research report objectives at the outset of your research process.

e. Finally – and of great importance – is the need to remember that a major cause of failure stems from **insufficient analysis and evaluation of information gathered and presented**.

Some students seem to encounter problems with analysis and evaluation. Analysis implies a detailed study of the elements of a complex phenomenon in order to explain or interpret it more easily. For example, Topic Area 8 concerns 'The Business and Financial Performance of an Organisation over a three-year period'.

'Business and Financial Performance' is a complex phenomenon. It contains a number of elements such as market share, market growth, revenue growth, profitability, liquidity, productivity and other efficiency indicators. Such indicators may be quantitative or qualitative. Any study of business and financial performance over a three-year period must, of course, take account of the business environment or context in which the organisation operates. This is why a situation analysis – such as a PEST or 5 C analysis – can be of great help, but only if properly applied to the organisation in its business context. Aspects of financial performance may be highlighted by appropriate use of ratio analysis. However, any attempt to explain why these indicators have changed must be grounded in the business context, which includes some

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consideration of actions by government, competitors and the organisation itself.

‘Evaluation’ is a process of forming judgments about something, in terms of its significance, size, quality or impact. It implies processes of measuring, appraising, estimating, judging. To do this simply by looking at the organisation’s performance year on year is insufficient. It needs to be considered against the performance of similar organisations. Hence, the use of comparator organisations, ‘benchmarking’ against the best in the industry, or using industry norms is required if one is to arrive at a more objective conclusion about performance – that is, establishing in relation to the performance of others, whether or not the performance of the organisation you have studied is judged as good or poor.

When considering performance, students also need to recognise that the judgments of different stakeholder groups are likely to be based on different criteria or indicators.

- Shareholders will look at indicators related to capital growth and dividends.
- Customers will tend to focus on a price/quality dimension – such as ‘value for money’.
- Suppliers may be much more concerned with liquidity/longevity of a business relationship.
- Employees may be most concerned with those indicators related to increased security of employment and promotion opportunities, such as growth and liquidity, etc.

Thus a perspective that takes account of such different indicators and viewpoints, and includes both short and longer-term criteria, is likely to be helpful in evaluating performance. The actual perspective that is taken in this case will ultimately be determined by the specific objectives established for your research report.

The need to ensure that your report demonstrates the required analytical and evaluative skills will be important whatever your choice of topic area. If you select the topic on corporate governance you need to be able to define what it is, the factors or elements that it consists of and how you propose to judge or assess whether or not it is good, and in comparison with which particular yardstick. You might, in this topic, select one of the reports that sets out a code of good practice and use this as the basis on which to judge the quality of corporate governance in the organisation you have studied.

If you select the topic on motivation, you will probably evaluate your findings against predictions originating from one or more of the motivational theories you have reviewed. Again, the important point here is that if your report demonstrates that you have applied appropriate analytical and evaluative

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techniques to the information you have gathered, which enables you to meet your report objectives, then you will meet the RAP requirements in this very important assessment area.

Do read carefully all the advice on how to approach your RAP in the [information pack](#) on ACCA's website, and pay particular attention to the defined assessment criteria. If you have concerns about tackling the RAP then you should note that in addition to providing you with a mentor, many provider institutions also include a brief introduction to research methods tailored to RAP requirements as part of the package.

Mentors from provider institutions are more likely to be familiar with both research methods and what it takes to achieve a pass in the RAP, and they should be able to provide the support and guidance you may require. Completing your RAP can be a significant learning experience, and paying attention to the points outlined above should help you to succeed.

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