

# Developing a PPS&Q

(Thinking activity but can (should) be incorporated in writing)

Precise convincing research writing begins with a clear research focus. In order to be focussed, research needs to be well *conceptualised*.

**Conceptualisation** includes:

A researchable **problem** that is relevant to your **audience**, an appropriate research design (paradigm, data collection methods, data analysis strategy, sampling, etc) and an appropriate **conceptual** framework.

Some of the tools in conceptualising a research paper are the **problem statement**, the **purpose statement** and the **research questions (PPS&Q)**. The problem statement, purpose statement and research questions need to be written up in a specific format. It should be **no longer than a page**. You will address issues that you include in the problem statement in other parts of your research paper. But for the purposes of conceptualising your research, follow the format of the problem statement identified below.

## The Problem Statement

The problem statement is a clear, well constructed **paragraph** that succinctly states the **problem** your research will help solve. Research is always conceptualised around a problem. Often poorly conceptualised research simply has no problem. If you are struggling to get to grips with your research study, try to identify the **key** problem.

Included in the problem statement is:

- ☉ A statement of the **problem** (1 or 2 sentences). For example: *Mature students find it difficult to return to studying after a number of years away from educational environments.*
- ☉ A few sentences that identify the **knowledge gap**. The knowledge gap is something specific to academic contexts. All academic research is built on previous research. Part of the process of conducting research for academics is about reviewing the research that has come before and indicating where the research currently being undertaken fits into the larger body of research. Does your study agree with previous research, dispute previous research, attempt to replicate an earlier study, disprove one, or introduce a new concept? **The knowledge gap is about referring to previous research, situating your study within it and giving a reason why your study adds to current research** in this area. For example: *Although much research has been conducted on access to higher education institutions for mature students, and performance, little is known about the studying practices of these students when they return to learning after periods away from education.*

- ☞ A sentence or two that provides a **context** for the study. The context refers to the place, time, institution, environment, etc, in which your study takes place. Without a context, the study is vague, ungrounded and difficult to conceptualise. For example: *More mature students are returning to higher education institutions in Canada than ever before. Statistics show that before 2004, X% of students were above the age of 20 when entering their first year of study. Since then, this figure has increased to Y%.*
- ☞ Finally, your problem statement needs a sentence or two that persuades the reader through **logic** and **documentation** that there is a pressing **need** for this research. You need logic so that your reader can see that you have added 1 plus 1 and reached 2. That your research problem makes sense. That you haven't made wild claims. You need documentation because in an academic context **evidence** from research comes from two sources: i) **primary** data such as interviews, observations, experiments, etc; or ii) secondary **published** data.

Why is published data considered as evidence?

**Referencing** is important in an academic context because it serves as **evidence** for you. Your readers will look at your evidence carefully in order to establish whether or not they believe the claims you make in your research. The more evidence, the more **convinced** your reader is, the closer to 'truth' your research gets. If your references are old or not relevant, then your evidence is weak. If your referencing is sloppy, then your reader assumes the research is also sloppy.

For example: *Febris (2004) and Cigol (2000) argue that mature students often do not have the social capital necessary for successful completion of studies which is why they enter educational institutions as mature students. This study intends to explore if the difficulties mature students experience in learning can be explained by a lack of social capital.*

- ☞ The Problem Statement usually implies a **conceptual framework**. What is the conceptual framework in this example? If the conceptual framework is significant to the study, then it should be mentioned clearly in the problem statement. The conceptual framework needs to be unpacked in the literature review.

### **The Purpose Statement**

The problem statement leads into the purpose statement. This statement is the key conceptual paragraph that frames and guides the research. Purpose statements can, and should, be written for chapters, sections and paragraphs. The purpose statement for the research as a whole will direct and focus the entire project. Often the purpose statement changes through the research process. You need to continually revise and refine it.

Included in the purpose statement is:

- ☉ The sentence: **The purpose of this research is to...**
- ☉ A sentence that says what you propose to do in the research.
- ☉ What you propose to do should remedy the knowledge gap identified in the problem statement.
- ☉ The broad goal of the research. The purpose statement is clear on what the research intends to do: to expose, explore, investigate, experiment, etc.
- ☉ The purpose statement is usually followed by research questions, hypothesis or objectives.
- ☉ For example: *The purpose of this research is to explore what difficulties mature students experience when returning to educational studies after a gap period. This study intends to research how mature students study in a faculty MUN, and how these study habits relate to social capital.*
- ☉ The Purpose Statement should lead into the research questions.

### Research Questions

- ☉ The research questions are not a re-statement of the research problem. They **unpack** the research problem. These are not questions one would ask an interviewee. Instead, they are guiding questions like apple pie slices that make up the whole pie. It is very easy for have a plum pie slice to slip in as one of the questions. When this happens, the researcher often has to do the research for both pies.
- ☉ The questions also give the reader some idea of the **scope** of the project. They indicate the size of the project and the area it will cover.
- ☉ Think about the questions carefully.
- ☉ Questions often correspond with chapters in a research project. In other words, the questions can provide the organising framework for specific chapters.
- ☉ Questions must be framed as questions.

For example:

1. *What does 'returning student' mean?*
2. *What difficulties do mature returning students experience?*
3. *What study habits do mature returning students have?*
4. *How do these study habits and difficulties relate to social capital?*

Can you see how there is a logic to the questions? They unpack the purpose statement in an order that allows us to build up knowledge in a systematic way. One question leads to the other and the final question pulls it all together again.

A plum pie question in this example would be: *Do mature students experience difficulties because of institutional inefficiencies?* The question in itself is important and relevant. In the end, this may be a conclusion of the study but it is not the intention of this study to focus on institutional efficiency. That is a different project.

### **The problem of problem closure**

Inevitably, defining a problem and simplifying a research thread means focusing the research in one particular direction. *Problem closure* occurs when the way a research problem is defined determines the causes and consequences and prevents alternative ways of thinking about the problem from being accommodated. For example, HIV/AIDS was initially conceptualised only in terms of the *cause* and it was only because activists consciously reformulated the problem that focus shifted to developing more antiretroviral drugs to treat symptoms (Guthman, 2011).

### **After the PPS&Q**

- Develop the argument (take a stand on the problem), unpack assumptions, establish counter-arguments, decide what evidence you will need to support your argument.
- Develop the conceptual framework which will become part of your literature review
- Expand the knowledge gap into the literature review
- Expand the purpose into the research design and methodology
- Decide what data you need to collect to address your questions.
- PPS&Q is always a work in progress. Continually re-work your PPS&Q throughout the research process.

### **References**

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