

Reflective Report

Introduction

The process of researching and writing my dissertation on Artificial Intelligence (AI) adoption among UK SMEs has been a highly demanding yet rewarding journey. It has required me to develop academic, personal, and professional skills, including critical thinking, time management, data synthesis, and scholarly writing. Using Gibbs' Reflective Cycle as a framework, this report reflects on the stages of the process, the challenges encountered, the lessons learned, and how these experiences will shape my future academic and professional development.

Description

The thesis focused on identifying how UK SMEs plan AI adoption, what hinders and drives adoption, and how AI influences decision-making, competitiveness, and innovation. Compared with primary research, I had employed a secondary qualitative approach. That entailed thoroughly examining and integrating 35-40 sources of academic and practitioner literature through a thematic analysis framework.

The work required me to engage with three main tasks:

1. Carrying out systematic literature review on several databases, and adhering to PRISMA guidelines for ensuring rigour.
2. Carrying out thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process, identifying patterns across differing studies.
3. Structuring and writing six chapters that addressed the research objectives, linked results to theory, and drew practical and theoretical conclusions.

Feelings

I was both excited and intimidated at first. Adoption of AI by SMEs has been a recent and very rapidly expanding area of study, and so it presented an intellectual challenge. However, the wealth of literature and the speed at which technologies are changing also gave rise to feelings of doubt: would I struggle to sift, synthesise, and critically examine such an extensive evidence base? In the intermediate stages, specifically during literature review, I felt overwhelmed. A lot of studies overlapped on content but differ in method quality. At first, I found it difficult not to merely summarize sources instead of critically synthesizing them. However, as I progressed, I began to feel more confident and motivated. Recognising patterns across studies, for example that technological complexity is less of a barrier in the UK due to digital maturity, gave me a sense of achievement and ownership of new insights. Completing each chapter increased my confidence in my ability to engage critically with complex material and present findings coherently.

Evaluation

There were strengths and weaknesses in the experience of doing the dissertation. The strengths were development of good literature searching skills. Through the refining of search terms and systematic screening of sources, it was possible to obtain breadth and depth. Analytical skills were also developed so that it became possible to move from describing to synthesising, which is an essential skill at higher levels of study.

Another positive was my time management improvement. At first, I underestimated the time required for referencing and proofreading. Midway through, I adopted weekly planning sessions and broke down tasks into smaller milestones. This gave me better control over the workload and reduced stress.

On the negative side, it was at times challenging for me to keep academic voice. Since many of the practitioner reports contained persuasive writing, I had to consciously refrain from adopting their style and instead keep detached. Word count limits also bothered me. Chapters 2 and 5 had the potential of going well beyond the limit, so I had to make intentional choices regarding leaving out areas, which frustrated me but ended up educating me on the use of succinctness.

Analysis

Reflecting on why challenges occurred, I realise that many arose from the complexity of secondary qualitative research. Without primary data, I depended on other researchers' designs, meaning I had to be critical about methodological rigour and potential bias. This sharpened my evaluative skills, as I learned to distinguish between high-quality peer-reviewed evidence and less reliable grey literature.

It also illustrated the value of theoretical foundations. Through the application of TOE, TAM/UTAUT2, and DOI theories as ways of framing the analysis, I was able to comment on findings systematically instead of getting bogged down in detail. The identification of the need for ethical governance and trust being separately and clearly included in adoption models came from examining these models intensively and pitting them against evidence.

Lastly, the reflective element revealed for me the function of resilience and flexibility. Preliminary stress regarding scope was alleviated when I understood that I could write iteratively—pulling together, rewriting, and fine-tuning sections. The writing of the discussion chapter marked a watershed, at which point I moved from merely reporting results to critically interpreting them.

Conclusion

Overall, the dissertation has represented a transformative learning experience. It enriched my subject knowledge of AI adoption and extended my academic capabilities of research design, critical analysis, and scholarly communication. It taught me how to handle uncertainty, work effectively on time, and construct evidence-based arguments. The process also refined my professional confidence, and now I am able to participate effectively in current debates on digital transformation with greater authority.

Action Plan

Looking forward, I plan to apply the lessons learned in three ways:

1. **Academic development** – I will continue refining my critical writing by engaging in research projects and publications. I intend to build on this dissertation by potentially transforming it into a journal article or conference paper, focusing particularly on the novel theoretical contribution regarding ethics and trust in AI adoption.
2. **Professional application** –As a professional, when working on consultancy, policy, or business strategy, integration of complex information and providing evidence-informed recommendations will also prove very beneficial. As part of professional development, practicing integration of theory and practice, as has been carried out with TOE and TAM models here, will also continue.
3. **Personal growth** –A Personal development – I will retain the time management system forged through the dissertation, e.g., planning of milestones and reflective check-ins, for use with both academics and professional engagements. I also plan to accept reflection as a habitual process, which will aid me in continuously learning and adapting.