

Master of Business  
Administration (MBA)  
Dissertation Handbook  
for International  
Students

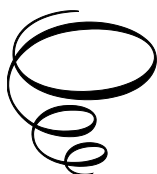


# Master of Business Administration (MBA) Dissertation Handbook for International Students

By

Ryan Thomas Williams

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for International Students

By Ryan Thomas Williams

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# CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	xii
List of Tables .....	xiii
Reflective tasks.....	xv
Acknowledgements .....	xvi
Glossary.....	xvii
Chapter 1 .....	1
Introduction	
1.1. Introduction.....	1
1.2. The MBA .....	2
1.3. What is an MBA dissertation? .....	4
1.4. Why a research project?.....	6
1.5. Thinking of a research topic.....	8
1.5.1. Recommended techniques.....	11
1.6. Student reflective task .....	15
1.7. Chapter Summary .....	16
Chapter 2 .....	17
The Proposal	
2.1 Introduction.....	17
2.2 Breakdown structure .....	18
2.3 Working title .....	19
2.3.1 Good and bad examples .....	20
2.3.2 Expert Top Tip: Research approaches influence project titles .....	23
2.4 Project background .....	23
2.5 Research aim/statement .....	24
2.6. Research objectives.....	26
2.6.1 Expert Top Tip: Use Bloom's taxonomy for research objectives .....	26
2.7 Methodology .....	28

2.8 Ethics .....	30
2.9 Checklist and templates .....	32
2.10 Timeline .....	32
2.11 Example of a good research proposal.....	34
2.12 Example of a bad research proposal.....	37
2.13 Student reflective task.....	38
2.14 Chapter Summary .....	38
Chapter 3 .....	40
Working with Your Supervisor	
3.1 Introduction.....	40
3.2 The supervisor and student contract.....	42
3.3 Effective Communication .....	43
3.4 Understanding Supervisor Styles .....	44
3.5 Setting goals.....	45
3.5.1 Expert Top Tip: Develop a timeline for research.....	45
3.5.2 Expert Top Tip: Agree on interim deadlines and milestones ..	46
3.5.3 Expert Top Tip: Strategies for managing and meeting deadlines .....	47
3.6 Preparing for meetings .....	49
3.7 Receiving and implementing feedback .....	50
3.8 Student reflective task.....	52
3.9 Chapter Summary .....	53
Chapter 4 .....	55
Ethics	
4.1 Introduction.....	55
4.2 Key definitions.....	57
4.3 Ethical Principles in Research.....	62
4.4 Ethical Approval Process .....	64
4.4.1 Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) and Ethics Committees....	65
4.4.2 Steps to Obtain Ethical Approval .....	66
4.5 Navigating Ethical Approval in an International Context.....	68
4.5.1 Cultural and International Considerations in Research Ethics .....	68
4.5.2 Practical Strategies for Cultural and International Research Ethics .....	71
4.6 MBA projects and ethical considerations.....	72
4.7 MBA Projects with Ethical Oversight .....	75
4.8 Student reflective task.....	79
4.9 Conclusion .....	79
4.10 Chapter Summary .....	80

Chapter 5 .....	82
The Introduction .....	
5.1 Introduction.....	82
5.2 Purpose of the Introduction.....	83
5.3 Key Components of a Dissertation Introduction.....	84
5.4 Example structures.....	87
5.5 Example introduction.....	88
5.6. Expert Top Tip: an engaging introduction.....	89
5.6.1 Expert Top Tip: coherent and logical research objectives ....	90
5.6.2 Expert Top Tip: identifying the research gap .....	90
5.6.3 Expert Top Tip: the significance of research on literature and industry .....	91
5.7 Student reflective task.....	93
5.8 Chapter Summary .....	93
Chapter 6 .....	95
The Literature Review .....	
6.1 Introduction.....	95
6.2 Identifying Relevant Literature.....	96
6.2.1 Searching.....	97
6.3 Writing the Literature Review.....	99
6.3.1 Structuring your review.....	100
6.3.2 Example structure.....	102
6.3.3 Citations and referencing.....	103
6.4 Criticality vs descriptive .....	105
6.4.1 The Importance of Criticality in an MBA Dissertation .....	106
6.4.2 Techniques for Critical Writing.....	106
6.4.3 Achieving a Balance Between Descriptive and Critical Writing.....	107
6.5 Examples of Descriptive and Critical Writing .....	108
6.5.1 Leadership .....	108
6.5.2 Digital Marketing .....	109
6.5.3 Artificial Intelligence.....	110
6.7 Example examiner comments .....	111
6.8 Expert Top Tip: systematic reviews are not literature reviews.....	112
6.8.1 Expert Top Tip: literature review best practices .....	113
6.9 Student reflective task.....	114
6.10 Chapter Summary .....	115

Chapter 7 .....	116
The Methodology .....	
7.1 Introduction.....	116
7.2 Research Philosophy and Paradigms .....	118
7.2.1 Positivism.....	119
7.2.2 Interpretivism .....	120
7.2.3 Pragmatism.....	120
7.3 Understanding Ontology and Epistemology .....	121
7.4 Expert Top Tip: research philosophy common misconceptions....	122
7.5 Research Design .....	124
7.5.1 Exploratory Research Design .....	124
7.5.2 Descriptive Research Design.....	125
7.5.3 Explanatory Research Design.....	126
7.6 Research Approaches .....	126
7.6.1 Qualitative Research.....	127
7.6.2 Quantitative Research.....	127
7.6.3 Mixed-Methods Research.....	128
7.7 Expert Top Tip: selecting an appropriate research design.....	129
7.8 Sampling.....	130
7.8.1 Probability Sampling .....	131
7.8.2 Non-Probability Sampling.....	131
7.8.3 Common Sampling Techniques for International Students ...	132
7.8.4 Determining Sample Size .....	133
7.8.5 Common Misconceptions About Sampling in Qualitative Research .....	135
7.9 Data Collection Methods .....	135
7.9.1 Primary Data Collection .....	136
7.9.2 Secondary Data Collection.....	139
7.10 Data Analysis .....	141
7.10.1 Data Analysis Software .....	143
7.10.2 Analysing Qualitative Data with Cross-Cultural Considerations .....	144
7.10.3 Step-by-Step Example of Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) .....	145
7.10.4 Step-by-Step Example of Descriptive Statistics .....	145
7.11 Ethical Considerations .....	146
7.11.1 Ethical Principles.....	146
7.11.2 Ethical Approval Processes in the U.K.....	148
7.11.3 Expert Top Tip: Ethical Challenges .....	149
7.11.4 Internet Ethics.....	150



7.12 Data Quality .....	152
7.12.1 Validity and Reliability in Quantitative Research.....	152
7.12.2 Trustworthiness and Credibility in Qualitative Research ...	153
7.12.3 Generalisability .....	155
7.14 Expert Top Tip: Justifying Methodological Choices.....	155
7.15 Student reflective task.....	159
7.16 Conclusion .....	159
7.17 Chapter Summary .....	160
 Chapter 8 .....	 163
The Presentation of Findings	
8.1 Introduction.....	163
8.2 Presentation of Quantitative Findings.....	164
8.2.1 Descriptive Statistics .....	164
8.2.2 Descriptive statistics examples.....	166
8.2.3 Inferential Statistics .....	182
8.2.4 Inferential statistics examples.....	185
8.3 Presentation of Qualitative Findings.....	197
8.3.1 Thematic Analysis .....	198
8.4 Presentation of Mixed Methods Findings .....	204
8.5 Cross-Cultural and Contextual Findings (for International Students).....	206
8.6 Student reflective task.....	211
8.7 Chapter Summary .....	211
 Chapter 9 .....	 213
The Discussion	
9.1 Introduction.....	213
9.2 Interpreting Research Findings .....	214
9.3 Comparing Results with the Literature .....	216
9.3.1 Good Examples of Linking Findings to the Literature .....	217
9.3.2 Bad Examples of Linking Findings to the Literature .....	219
9.3.3 Bad Examples of Failing to Link Findings to the Literature .....	219
9.3.4 Expert Top Tip: linking back to the literature .....	221
9.4 Theoretical and Practical Implications.....	221
9.5 Addressing Research Limitations.....	223
9.5.1 Good Examples of Addressing Research Limitations .....	226
9.5.2 Bad Examples of Addressing Research Limitations.....	227
9.5.3 Expert Top Tip: addressing research limitations.....	228
9.6 Critical Reflection and Personal Learning .....	228

9.7 Recommendations for Future Research .....	231
9.7.1 Good Examples of Recommendations for Future Research ..	233
9.7.2 Bad Examples of Recommendations for Future Research ....	234
9.7.3 Expert Top Tip: future research .....	235
9.8 Conclusion .....	235
9.9 Student reflective task.....	237
9.10 Chapter Summary .....	237
Chapter 10 .....	239
The Reflection	
10.1 Introduction.....	239
10.2 Purpose and Importance of Reflection in Dissertations .....	240
10.3 Key Elements of a Reflective Chapter .....	242
10.4 Personal and Academic Growth Through the Research Process ...	243
10.5 Ethical and Cultural Considerations.....	245
10.6 Lessons for Future Research and Professional Practice .....	247
10.7 Structuring Your Reflection .....	248
10.8 Using Reflective Models.....	250
10.8.1 Gibbs' Reflective Cycle.....	250
10.8.2 Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory .....	251
10.8.3 Schön's Reflective Practice .....	251
10.8.4 Additional Reflective Models.....	251
10.9 Practical Application of Reflective Models .....	252
10.10 Student reflective task.....	253
10.11 Chapter Summary .....	253
Chapter 11 .....	255
Concluding Remarks	
11.1 Reflections on the MBA Dissertation Process for International Students.....	257
11.2 Summary of Expert Top Tips .....	258
11.3 Conclusion .....	261
References .....	263
Appendix A.....	266
Example proposal template	
Appendix B.....	268
Supervisory meeting template form	

Appendix C.....	269
Dissertation feedback form	
Appendix D .....	270
Thematic Analysis transcript	
Appendix E.....	273
Thematic Mind map example	

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Imperial College London taxonomy pyramid .....	28
Figure 2: Example timeline for a 12-week dissertation .....	33
Figure 3: Supervisory meeting template form .....	50
Figure 4: Dissertation feedback form .....	50
Figure 5: Literature serves as a protective barrier .....	99
Figure 6: Start broad, then narrow .....	100
Figure 7: Bar charts .....	167
Figure 8: Pie charts .....	169
Figure 9: Histograms .....	170
Figure 10: Frequency Polygons .....	172
Figure 11: Scatterplots .....	174
Figure 12: Boxplots .....	176
Figure 13: Standard deviation .....	178
Figure 14: Normal distribution .....	179
Figure 15: Positive monotonic relationship .....	186
Figure 16: Negative monotonic relationship .....	187
Figure 17: Nonmonotonic relationship .....	187
Figure 18: Class attendance and exam scores .....	189
Figure 19: Pearson's correlation $r$ value .....	190
Figure 20: Spearman's rank $r$ -value .....	191
Figure 21: Regression analysis .....	192

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: The benefits of integrating projects into MBA programmes.....	7
Table 2: Proposal breakdown structure .....	19
Table 3: The proposal’s methodology. ....	29
Table 4: The proposal’s ethical considerations.....	31
Table 5: Dissertation checklist .....	32
Table 6: Example timeline for a 12-week dissertation. ....	32
Table 7: The supervisor and student contract .....	42
Table 8: SMART Goals template. ....	49
Table 9: Ethics key terms and definitions.....	62
Table 10: Steps to Obtain Ethical Approval .....	67
Table 11: MBA projects and ethical considerations.....	74
Table 12: Identifying literature.....	97
Table 13: Overcoming Language and Cultural Barriers in Data Collection .....	139
Table 14: Secondary search strategy .....	141
Table 15: Inclusion/exclusion criteria .....	141
Table 16: Ethical challenges top tips .....	150
Table 17: Common Mistakes in Descriptive Statistics .....	166
Table 18: Standard deviation data .....	178
Table 19: Overview of commonly used statistical tests.....	183
Table 20: Common Mistakes in Inferential Statistics.....	185

Table 21: Correlation coefficient.....	186
Table 22: Example data: exam scores and class attendance .....	188
Table 23: Spearman's rank correlation .....	191
Table 24: T-test p-value.....	194
Table 25: Observed frequencies .....	196
Table 26: Expected frequencies.....	197
Table 27: Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps for thematic analysis.....	199
Table 28: Aspects of Mixed Methods Analysis.....	205
Table 29: Common Mistakes in Mixed Methods Analysis.....	206
Table 30: Challenges in Interpreting Cross-Cultural Data.....	209

# REFLECTIVE TASKS

- 1.0 Student reflective task- Introduction
- 2.0 Student reflective task- The proposal
- 3.0 Student reflective task- Working with your supervisors
- 4.0 Student reflective task- Ethics
- 5.0 Student reflective task- The introduction
- 6.0 Student reflective task- The literature review
- 7.0 Student reflective task- The methodology
- 8.0 Student reflective task- The presentation of findings
- 9.0 Student reflective task- The discussion
- 10.0 Student reflective task- The reflection

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# GLOSSARY

<b>AI</b>	Artificial Intelligence
<b>ANOVA</b>	Analysis of Variance
<b>APA</b>	American Psychological Association
<b>CEO</b>	Chief Executive Officer
<b>CFO</b>	Chief Financial Officer
<b>CMI</b>	Chartered Management Institute
<b>COVID</b>	Coronavirus Disease
<b>CSR</b>	Corporate Social Responsibility
<b>DBA</b>	Doctorate in Business Administration
<b>EMEA</b>	Europe, Middle East, and Africa
<b>E.U.</b>	European Union
<b>GDPR</b>	General Data Protection Regulation
<b>IBM</b>	International Business Management
<b>IQR</b>	Interquartile Range
<b>IRB</b>	Institutional Review Board
<b>JSTOR</b>	Journal Storage
<b>LMS</b>	Learning Management System
<b>MBA</b>	Master of Business Administration
<b>MLA</b>	Modern Language Association
<b>MMR</b>	Mixed Methods Research
<b>MOOC</b>	Massive Open Online Course
<b>MS</b>	Microsoft
<b>NASA</b>	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
<b>ONS</b>	Office for National Statistics
<b>SD</b>	Standard Deviation
<b>SMART</b>	Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound
<b>SPE</b>	Stanford Prison Experiment
<b>SPSS</b>	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
<b>USA</b>	United States of America
<b>XYZ</b>	Placeholder for company name



# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### **1.1. Introduction**

Embarking on an MBA dissertation or research project represents a significant part of the academic journey for both home and international students. Students should be proud of their academic and industry experience that has led them to this point.

This chapter introduces the key steps and considerations for navigating this academic challenge. It begins by highlighting the importance of the dissertation within the MBA programme, describing its role not just as a requirement for graduation and the job market but as an opportunity for students to apply theoretical knowledge to practical, real-world business problems. The book's title states the infamous MBA phrase, but it is relevant and extends to other Business programmes, which may have a similar course structure and, importantly, a final dissertation. For this chapter and all subsequent chapters, the term MBA can be used interchangeably with programmes such as a Masters in International Business Management, a Masters in Digital Business Management, and even a Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA).

This introduction outlines the primary objectives of the dissertation, which cover the contribution of original research to the field of business administration and the enhancement of students' professional and personal development. The chapter also addresses international students' unique challenges and opportunities while studying in the U.K., including cultural differences in academic practices, language barriers, and access to resources. It emphasises the significance of understanding the academic culture in the U.K., including expectations for critical thinking, academic integrity, and independent research.

Further, the chapter aims to guide students through the initial stages of their dissertation journey, starting with selecting a research topic that is both personally and professionally meaningful and feasible within the constraints of the programme. It discusses strategies for developing a research question

that addresses a gap in the existing literature alongside methods for conducting a thorough literature review to frame the research within the context of existing knowledge. The introduction concludes by highlighting the importance of planning and time management, offering practical advice for creating a realistic timeline and milestones for the dissertation process. It sets the expectation that the journey ahead is demanding yet deeply rewarding, promising a profound impact on the student's academic and professional trajectory.

## 1.2. The MBA

A Master of Business Administration (MBA) is often described as a postgraduate degree programme that provides *advanced education* and training in various business management and administration (Mintzberg, 2004). The programme typically lasts one to two years of full-time study or longer if pursued part-time (which is common among career professionals). It is designed to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and competencies required to excel in managerial and leadership roles in various industries (Cameron, 2021; Datar et al., 2010).

MBA curricula typically cover a wide range of subjects, including finance, marketing, operations, accounting, human resources, strategic management, and organisational behaviour. Students are introduced to theoretical frameworks and practical applications, which enable them to thoroughly understand the challenges and opportunities that characterise the complexities of the global business landscape (Datar et al., 2010). The international nature of MBA programmes uniquely positions students to explore topics that reflect their multicultural experiences. For instance, an international student studying in the U.K. might investigate the impact of cultural diversity on team performance, drawing on personal experiences from working in diverse teams. These perspectives enhance the student's understanding and contribute to the programme's global learning environment. In addition to core courses, MBA programmes frequently offer elective modules or specialisations, allowing students to customise their education according to their individual interests and career aspirations. For example, students may have the opportunity to specialise in an MBA focused on digital transformation or select a corporate strategy module as with Teesside University's MBA pathway.

A distinctive characteristic of MBA programmes is their emphasis on experiential learning and solving real-world problems. Students often engage in case studies, simulations, and group projects that require them to

apply the concepts and theories they have learned to address real business issues and challenges (Datar et al., 2010). However, this approach is becoming increasingly common across comparable international business programmes at the postgraduate level. It is particularly advantageous for international students, as it promotes the application of business theories to real-world issues across various cultural and economic contexts, enhancing their global business acumen. This hands-on experience is vital for developing critical thinking, problem-solving, and leadership skills, which are essential for succeeding in a competitive and dynamic international business landscape. Most universities will actively encourage students to address in-class problems using their global cosmopolitan mindset (Brimm, 2018).

In addition to academic assessments, MBAs may incorporate professional development elements, such as internships, placements, networking events, and career coaching services, designed to help students build their professional networks and improve their employability. Employers frequently seek MBA graduates for their advanced business expertise, leadership skills, and ability for strategic thinking, making a degree in this field an increasingly valuable asset in the job market.

These components are increasingly important for international students who may arrive in the U.K. with limited professional networks, as they help build professional connections to enhance their employability in the global job market (Datar et al., 2010). The MBA's focus on ethical leadership, social responsibility, and sustainability similarly appeals to international students, as there is a global shift towards more holistic business practices aimed at addressing contemporary challenges. The Propcom+ programme in Nigeria, which promotes climate-resilient and sustainable agriculture and forestry to boost productivity, is a good example of this.

Despite the many benefits of obtaining an MBA, previous critics argued that they were overly focused on functional and technical skills at the expense of critical thinking and ethical considerations (Mintzberg, 2004). In response to these critiques, many MBAs in the U.K. sought to incorporate a more holistic approach to business education, emphasising the importance of ethical leadership, social responsibility, and sustainability alongside traditional management disciplines (Datar et al., 2010).

In summary, an MBA is a postgraduate degree programme that equips students for leadership and management roles in global industries by offering advanced education and training in business administration. These

programmes typically emphasise both theoretical knowledge and practical application, with a focus on experiential learning and real-world problem-solving within an international context. The MBA continues to be highly valued in the job market for its ability to develop well-rounded business professionals equipped with the skills and competencies necessary for success in today's competitive global business landscape (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). There is a sense of prestige associated with studying an MBA or similar programmes in the U.K.

### **1.3. What is an MBA dissertation?**

An MBA dissertation is a scholarly report or project, usually between 12,000 and 15,000 words, written by an MBA student as part of their degree programme requirements. The final project demonstrates the student's ability to apply the knowledge and skills acquired throughout their studies to a business-related issue or problem (Verzuh 2021). It typically involves conducting original research, using primary or secondary data, analysing data, and synthesising findings to produce evidence-based conclusions and recommendations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The project presents unique challenges and opportunities for international students, which will be discussed in this chapter.

MBA dissertations differ from theses and doctoral dissertations in terms of their scope and depth. While the latter are more extensive, requiring several years of research and writing, MBA dissertations are shorter, typically completed within one academic year or less (Thomas & Hodges, 2010). In some universities, for instance, only 12 weeks may be allocated for the completion of the dissertation. Nevertheless, these projects are still expected to demonstrate high scholarly rigour, requiring students to engage with relevant literature, develop a robust research design, and present a well-structured and coherent argument (Kumar & Mardikyan, 2019).

Developing an MBA dissertation typically starts with selecting a topic that aligns with the student's specialisation and interests while holding practical significance for the business world (Thomas & Hodges, 2010). The topic should be sufficiently narrow and focused to facilitate a thorough investigation within the word limit. After choosing a topic, students perform a comprehensive literature review to identify and synthesise existing research, establish knowledge gaps, and position their research questions and working title within the wider academic discourse. Selecting a dissertation topic enables international students to incorporate their diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences into their research. University tutors

often encourage these students to choose topics that reflect global business challenges or are pertinent to their home countries, enriching their dissertations and contributing unique insights to the academic community. For instance, Hong Kongese students might leverage their home country's status as a global economic hub by researching industries such as banking or finance.

Subsequently, students develop a research methodology that outlines their approach to data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This section should provide a rationale for the chosen methods and demonstrate how they will help answer the research question or address the problem (Williams, 2024). The research methodology may employ quantitative methods, such as surveys or experiments, qualitative methods, such as interviews or case studies, or a combination of both, as with mixed methods research (MMR) (Williams, 2023). International students may bring diverse perspectives on research methodologies based on their educational backgrounds. However, all students must adhere to the relevant ethical code of conduct at the university and in the country where they study.

Most international MBAs offer comprehensive guidance on various research methods, providing examples from diverse cultural contexts. This supports students in selecting the most suitable approach for their topics. Students are also encouraged to discuss case studies or research projects that effectively utilise these methods across different countries to inspire and clarify their work.

Once data collection and analysis are complete, the findings are presented in a structured and logical manner, with clear connections to the research question and objectives (Kumar & Mardikyan, 2019). This section should encompass a thorough description of the results and an interpretation that positions the findings within the context of existing literature, clarifying their significance for the research problem (Creswell, 2013). Conducting primary and secondary research can be daunting for international students, particularly when it involves cross-cultural considerations. Students must be proactive and seek advice from tutors on ethically navigating cross-cultural research, along with practical tips for conducting interviews, surveys, and case studies in diverse settings. There may be instances where best practices and ethical codes of conduct differ from students' home countries.

The conclusion represents the final stage of the MBA dissertation. It summarises the key points of the research, discusses the implications of the

findings for the business world, and offers recommendations for future research and practice (Thomas & Hodges, 2010). Additionally, the conclusion should reflect on the study's limitations, acknowledging any weaknesses or areas for improvement in future research.

Throughout the process, MBA students are generally guided and supervised by a faculty member known as a supervisor, who offers feedback, support, and advice on the development and execution of the research project (Thomas & Hodges, 2010). The supervisor typically marks the final dissertation, though the work may also be assessed by a panel that may include both internal and external examiners, who evaluate the quality and rigour and its contribution to business administration.

Ultimately, completing an MBA dissertation signifies a student's readiness to enter the professional world, equipped with the knowledge, skills, and insights necessary to impact the organisations and industries they join. In this regard, the MBA dissertation represents one of the most significant milestones in a student's academic and professional journey, reflecting their commitment to excellence and their potential to contribute meaningfully to the ever-evolving world of business administration (Thomas & Hodges, 2010).

## 1.4. Why a research project?

Completing a project, such as a capstone project or dissertation, is the cornerstone of the MBA experience. It offers benefits that resonate with the distinctive path of international students. These projects fulfil academic requirements and bridge theoretical knowledge and practical application in a global business context. Table 1 explores the benefits of integrating projects into MBA programmes, focusing on the international student experience.

Benefits	Description
Application of Knowledge and Skills in Global Contexts	Projects enable international MBA students to apply business theories, concepts, and techniques to real-world situations, emphasising the complexities and dynamics of global markets. This experiential learning fosters a deep understanding of international business practices and hones problem-solving and decision-making skills critical for navigating diverse business environments.



Integration of Learning Across Cultures	MBAs encompass various disciplines such as finance, marketing, and strategy, each with global implications. Projects offer a platform for international students to synthesise this knowledge, integrating learning from multiple subjects to develop comprehensive strategies that address complex, global business challenges.
Development of Global Research Skills	Engaging in a project introduces students to the nuances of conducting research in an international context, from the literature review to data collection and analysis. This process equips them to make evidence-based decisions and identify opportunities across different markets, enhancing their ability to innovate and solve worldwide business challenges.
Demonstration of International Mastery	Completing a project demonstrates an international student's mastery of global business concepts and ability to apply this knowledge to solve real-world issues. It signifies their readiness for leadership roles in multinational companies and showcases their competence in addressing the demands of a globalised economy.
Enhancement of Professional Portfolio with International Insights	A well-conceived project can significantly enhance an international student's professional portfolio, highlighting their expertise in tackling global business problems. It becomes an asset during job interviews, allowing them to discuss their international experiences, insights, and the global applicability of their achievements.
Contribution to Global Business Administration	MBA projects by international students can fill gaps in existing knowledge and offer new perspectives that inform best practices in global business management. Their unique insights can contribute to the academic community and inspire innovation and positive change in international business practices.

*Table 1: The benefits of integrating projects into MBA programmes*

## 1.5. Thinking of a research topic

The qualities of a business and management research topic are consistent across higher education institutions in the U.K., although the emphasis on these qualities may vary. These qualities are necessary to meet the project specifications and assessment criteria. Understanding these qualities, considering the unique international context, is important for aligning your research with the requirements of your examining body as well as your personal and professional growth. As your research project progresses, you may discover other characteristics that contribute to a strong research topic. Recognising these can be advantageous for selecting a research topic and advancing your project. It may also be beneficial to consult your project supervisor about these qualities.

Firstly, the research topic you select and the research proposal you develop must align with the requirements of your examining body, such as your university, professional organisation, or other accredited institution. While this may seem obvious, if your MBA is part of an apprenticeship or accredited body such as the Chartered Management Institute (CMI), additional requirements may be necessary to fulfil the final research project module requirements. For example, stipulations may require that research is conducted at the apprentice's workplace.

Consequently, it is imperative to choose a research topic and craft your research proposal carefully. Some universities mandate that students gather data for their research projects, while others permit using preexisting data. Conversely, some Russell Group universities may require stronger justifications for students conducting secondary research or mixed methods.

Some institutions may require applied research based on a specific organisation, while others necessitate that the research falls within the scope of your course or programme. Some students may receive a broad scope of 'anything business related', which has advantages and challenges. Therefore, it is essential to review the assessment criteria for your research project and ensure that your chosen topic and proposal specifications allow you to meet those criteria. If in doubt, consult your project tutor for clarification.

Incorporating existing theoretical frameworks from the academic literature is central to selecting a research topic and developing a research proposal. Assessment criteria will likely require consideration of the theoretical context of your research topic within your proposal. As mentioned, utilising existing theory can refine your research topic, inform your research question,

and guide your research aims and objectives. Theoretical frameworks can also assist in developing clear definitions of the concepts used in your research (Podsakoff et al., 2016). Furthermore, as an international student, you bring a unique cross-cultural perspective that can enrich research; for example, through international case studies, literature, and texts. When selecting your topic and developing your proposal, consider theories that align with your research aims and reflect the diverse cultural contexts you are familiar with. This approach will not only fulfil the assessment criteria but also contribute to a broader understanding of your topic in a global context. Most universities encourage this global outlook.

It is also essential to ensure that your research topic exhibits symmetry in potential outcomes, meaning that your findings will hold similar value regardless of the results (Gill & Johnson, 2010). Without symmetry, you may invest significant time and effort into researching your topic only to reach an inconsequential conclusion. Regardless of the outcome, ensure your research facilitates the development of an engaging project report. For international students, ensuring that your findings will be significant regardless of the results is crucial, but also assess the feasibility of conducting your research across different cultural settings. Some topics may pose greater challenges due to cultural sensitivities or access issues, particularly if your research involves cross-cultural comparisons or data collection from specific regions. Students should also maintain realistic expectations of their project; for instance, projects exploring consumer perceptions of space tourism are unlikely to be used by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to analyse and influence the policy and funding of their Mars project.

Your research topic must also fall within your ability to execute. Ability can be assessed in various ways. Personally, you should feel confident that you either have or can acquire the necessary skills for researching the topic. While it is anticipated that you will improve your research skills as you progress on your project, certain skills, such as learning a new foreign language, may be unfeasible within your existing time limits.

Similarly, if research is conducted in a home country, linguistic competencies, access to necessary resources, and the ability to navigate cultural nuances should all be considered as part of the capability to execute the project.

Your capability is also influenced by your ability to secure the financial and time resources necessary for researching the topic. Some topics may be

overly complex or require an extended duration to observe the impact of an intervention, making them difficult to complete within the allotted time of your course. Similarly, topics that necessitate extensive travel, expensive equipment, or specialised software that is available at your university should only be pursued if you possess adequate financial resources.

Additionally, capability involves being reasonably confident in gaining access to any data you may need to collect. Many people initially suggest ideas where accessing data becomes challenging. Certain sensitive topics, such as financial performance or decision-making by senior managers, can be intriguing but may pose significant access issues. Therefore, it is advisable to consult your project tutor about potential access concerns. Needing access to specific government organisation documents or applying for licences are common issues for secondary research students. Considering the development of a robust methodology generally helps clarify capability and feasibility issues.

Your research topic should ignite your curiosity and for which you have or will cultivate a genuine interest. Most research projects last at least four months; a topic that initially only mildly interests you may become uninspiring, leading to subpar work and *writing fatigue*. Additionally, consider your future goals. If you aim to secure employment or pursue a career in a particular field, it is wise to use this opportunity to develop expertise in that area.

The extent to which these characteristics apply to you will depend on your research topic and the motivations driving your research. Nonetheless, most of these characteristics are likely to be relevant.

While business and management students are expected to refine their research ideas independently, international students, in particular, should seek support from their academic institutions. Drop-in sessions and example studies are likely to be used in the lectures and modules leading to the dissertation. Furthermore, this support may arise from preliminary ideas provided by sponsors, access to international databases, or guidance from tutors familiar with cross-cultural research. Using creative and rational techniques to develop your topic can ignite your passion for the subject and ensure a meaningful research experience. In other words, international students will have various opportunities to discuss and explore potential research ideas.

The specific techniques students choose and the order in which they use them are entirely at their discretion. However, students are encouraged to select those that are most useful and enjoyable. Employing one or more creative techniques increases the likelihood that your research project will engage both your heart and mind. Based on experience, using both rational and creative techniques is generally beneficial. Students need to understand these techniques and how they function to achieve this. Research conducted by international students might also align with their goals of bridging gaps between their home country and the U.K. or enhancing their professional portfolio on a global scale. This alignment can be particularly advantageous for students aiming to work in international business or maintain connections between their home country and the broader global business community. Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2019) recommend several techniques for this initial stage of the process, which are highlighted in the next subsection. The book by Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2019), *Research Methods for Business Students*, is highly recommended as it provides a comprehensive and in-depth treatment of the philosophical, methodological, and ethical aspects of conducting business and management research. Most university libraries are likely to carry this textbook.

### **1.5.1. Recommended techniques**

#### ***Leveraging Your Previous Academic Work***

Selecting a topic where you are likely to excel and already have some academic knowledge is important. One approach is to review completed assignments that received high grades. Many, if not most, of these assignments will likely relate to subject areas that interest you. These assignments can help guide you toward areas to explore and identify a research idea. Furthermore, by reading, you can focus on specific ideas for your research. At this stage, consider how you were assessed. If you particularly enjoyed one module that included a presentation and group work, this enjoyment may not necessarily translate into writing a 12,000-word dissertation.

#### ***Aligning with Career Aspirations***

Furthermore, this presents an excellent opportunity to reflect on your future career. Think about how your research project can align with your career aspirations, especially if you plan to work in a sector that benefits from a global perspective, such as financial management, international marketing, or strategic global management. A project related to your career goals can

serve as a valuable discussion point in job interviews, demonstrating your knowledge and enthusiasm for the field.

### ***Exploring Faculty Expertise***

University websites often showcase profiles of academic staff, which can be useful for identifying and developing research ideas pertinent to your project (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019). These profiles typically outline the subject areas each faculty member teaches, such as accounting, international management, marketing, and strategic management. Furthermore, they generally include information on specific research interests, such as regulating accounting standards, transnational management, pricing and price promotions, and organisational learning. Academic staff often provide a brief overview of their research interests, offering additional details. Lists of publications and conference papers, often with hyperlinks to online versions, may also be available. These resources offer further insight into the precise nature of their research interests. Examining this information can help you generate ideas for your research and steer you toward initial readings to assess your interest. Some universities even implement a matching system where students select their preferred academic staff for supervision, while others may assign supervisors at random. Based on experience, this varies with the size of the academic institution; while every university strives to pair students with a supervisor who has relevant industry or methodological experience, this is not always feasible due to workload constraints.

### ***Reviewing Past Projects***

Many students have found that reviewing past projects can be a helpful method for generating research ideas. For undergraduate and taught master's degrees, these projects are typically referred to as dissertations, while for research degrees, they are known as theses. Your tutor or module leader may be able to provide examples of previous assignments. A common approach involves browsing past project titles to find anything that captures your imagination. Take note of titles that seem interesting or grab your attention, along with any thoughts about them in relation to your research idea. A poorly worded title or a low mark on the project report is irrelevant during this process. The crucial factor is finding a topic that interests you, as this can serve as a foundation for developing new ideas in the same general area that will yield fresh insights.