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Setting the Scene

Introduction

Studying for a Masters Level qualification is a difficult, lengthy, but hopefully rewarding process. It should provide you with personal and professional satisfaction as you develop your own intellectual and professional capabilities. As you near the end of your programme of study you will be expected to complete a lengthy piece of work which is described in various ways in different institutions as a thesis, dissertation, extended study or project. During this book we will use the term 'project' to refer to any extended piece of Masters Level writing. The techniques we are writing about will be generally applicable to any extended Masters Level writing, but will be particularly focused on leadership and management. Carrying out a major project is the single most important aspect of Masters Level study and in this introductory chapter we will introduce and establish key ideas in this process.

In this chapter the following topics are considered:

- What is involved in completing your project?
- Are there special issues in leadership/management research?
- The nature of leadership and management
- How does your own role relate to the research context?

What is involved in completing your project?

As you start to consider your project you are likely to have already successfully completed a significant proportion of your Masters Level programme and be ready to undertake an intensive project over a number of months. You

will already have written a number of assignments ranging from 1,000 to 5,000 words in length. In some of the assignments you will have carried out a literature review, reviewed policy documents, undertaken a case study; you may have collected and analysed data and you might even have conducted a small-scale research project. In many cases you will have received specific research methods training and written about particular methods of enquiry. You may also be thinking of developing an area that you have previously successfully written about. The skills you have already developed as part of your Masters Level programme will act as a useful starting point for the project. However, you will need to enhance your existing skills and to develop a range of additional skills to successfully complete your project.

So how does the project differ from your previous work? One immediate and obvious difference is the number of words required. The project can range from 10,000 to over 20,000 words depending on the requirements of your institution. Even at the bottom end of the word scale it is likely to be a significant increase on anything you have written before. At first the prospect of having to write up to 20,000 words can appear daunting, especially if you have other commitments and have never done anything like this before. However, as you get into the detail of the project you are likely to find that the 20,000 word limit is too small to do justice to your chosen topic. At this preliminary stage that is probably difficult to believe, but you will hopefully soon discover just how easy it is to write up to 20,000 words, especially on a topic of personal interest. Of course those words have to be coherent, relevant and at the right level to meet the stringent Masters Level assessment criteria.

How do you get started on the project? An obvious starting point has to be your previous written work and you need to remember to build on the strengths you have already developed. The general requirements for working and writing at Masters Level will still apply and hopefully well developed habits will be continued and enhanced. You should be well aware of the assessment criteria for Masters Level and these will continue to provide a base for your work. The skills you have already acquired and the lessons learnt from completing previous written assignments will be equally applicable to writing your project. So you initially need to:

- Get yourself organised
- Be realistic about what you can achieve
- Identify an area that *you* would like to investigate
- Be aware of the specific requirements for the project
- Take advantage of the support and guidance that is available.

Getting yourself organised sounds obvious, but it is amazing how many students fail to heed this basic piece of advice. By getting yourself organised

we mean adopting some fundamental principles to ensure that you are fully equipped to complete the project. Firstly, consider the time implications of undertaking this piece of work. You are likely to be doing your project over a concentrated period of time, usually between three months and a year, depending on whether you are a full- or part-time student. You need to clear time to enable you to carry out the necessary work, so look carefully at your commitments and make sure you set aside blocks of time. It is often easier to focus on the project for a concentrated period of time rather than having to constantly pick up work again. Secondly, making a plan will help you to make the most of your time. A clear programme and structure, including key milestones, for the duration of the project will help you to achieve an effective use of your time. Your milestones will include identifying dates to complete your literature review, carrying out the fieldwork, undertaking analysis and commencing writing up. However, it is important to remember that your plan should not be too rigid and it is acceptable, even desirable, to amend the plan to reflect changing circumstances as you proceed through your project. You will need to discuss your plan with your tutor and we consider this planning in Chapter Two.

Being realistic about what you can achieve relates to the time issues we have already identified, but it also applies to your choice of topic. We will return to this in more detail in the next chapter, but students tend to want to ‘solve the problems of the world’ in their project. While this is a laudable aim and hopefully reflects your enthusiasm and commitment to the area you have chosen to investigate, you’ve got to be realistic. You only have a limited amount of time and of course a restricted number of words for the project, so the topic has to be manageable. If you start with a topic that is too large you will soon run into trouble, so remember to be realistic about what you can achieve.

Choosing a topic to investigate that personally interests you will increase your motivation and make the process easier. This is a chance for you to conduct an in-depth investigation into a topic of great personal interest and you may never be given this opportunity again, so make sure you choose your topic carefully. However, there may be pressure from your line manager or those funding your Masters Level study to conduct an investigation that is deemed to be useful to your organisation. This is an understandable pressure given the constraints on funding and the desire to achieve value for money. You will have to balance these pressures, but remember that by studying for a Masters Level qualification you will benefit personally and this will in turn have a positive impact on your organisation. Ideally, you will be able to choose a topic that reflects your own interests, has a positive impact on your own practice and benefits the organisation more widely.

Your own HE institution will have specific guidance on what is required to successfully complete your Masters Level project. Make sure you are aware

of these requirements and remember they may differ from those you have experienced when you completed your other assignments. They will be available either in printed form or electronically and it's worth spending some time checking on the detail. Higher Education institutions operate according to set procedures and routines, and no matter how ridiculous they may seem, these regulations have to be followed by all students, you will not be granted an exemption. Precious time and effort can be wasted by not following published guidelines. For example, marks can be deducted if word limit guidelines are not adhered to, and a completed project will not be marked if it does not conform to the presentation conventions. We will deal with such issues and look in detail at the assessment process in Chapter Ten.

There should be a wide range of support and guidance available for you to access as you navigate your way through your Masters Level project and we fully explore how to get the most from the available support in Chapter Eight. We have already said a little about the general documentary guidance available to you. For international students there is likely to be an international tutor who will be able to offer specialist support, especially in relation to access issues for research. You will also have a personal tutor who will be able to provide general support relating to non-project-specific issues, but the key person related to your Masters Level project will be your project supervisor or tutor. It is important that you establish a positive working relationship with your project supervisor or tutor who will either be an expert in your chosen area of study or in some aspect of research methodology. Having clear and consistent communication procedures are important and keeping in touch is vital. This is even more important when things are not going to plan. Your tutor will be able to act as a sounding board and to provide much needed reassurance as you progress through your period of study.

If you are a part-time student you will also be able to access support from your own institution, especially the leadership team who will be well placed to offer guidance on particular aspects of your research project. This might take the form of practical support in terms of providing information, access and most importantly time. Finally there are your fellow students who can provide an invaluable source of support and practical advice, and are especially aware of the particular pressures you are operating under.

Are there special issues in leadership/ management research?

So far, in this chapter, we have written about a range of general issues relating to your research project and explored how you actually get started. In the remainder of the chapter we are going to focus on more specific issues relating

to leadership and management. Every subject area has particular issues and trends that reflect current concerns in the discipline. Over time these will change and new theories and approaches will emerge and become fashionable. Leadership and management is no different in this respect to any other subject area, and as a student of this area you will have spent a considerable amount of time looking at current theories and debates and how they have been developed and implemented. This should have enabled you to have built up a detailed knowledge and understanding of current issues within this area. Your research project should build on these issues and your knowledge and understanding to enable you to develop a deeper understanding of the theoretical and practical aspects of leadership and management. Your own research into leadership and management will provide you with opportunities to develop key ideas and concepts. We will continue to return to some of these during the book as we illustrate key issues in developing and carrying out your research project by giving practical examples based on current best practice.

Carrying out research into leadership and management will enable you to relate the theoretical aspects of your course to your own practice. This is likely to contribute to your own personal development and it may also lead to benefits for your present or future employer. Your research project is likely to involve looking at the implementation of particular theories. Research in leadership and management is much more likely to focus on the practical rather than the theoretical. Whilst there is a strong theoretical base to leadership and management, it is a living subject and is rooted in the improvement of the practice of individuals and organisations. Leadership and management theories are an essential part of developing your understanding of the area, but they also have to be applied in a practical context. In your research you are likely to have the opportunity to look at how theory actually works, in practice. In reality you may find that the application of theoretical concepts does not always lead to a positive outcome. A significant part of your research project could be finding out why desired outcomes have not been achieved and what lessons have been learnt. In many cases as much can often be learnt from research into one failed policy than into a number of successful initiatives. Students are often wary of looking at aspects of leadership and management that are not successful and want to focus on successful outcomes. Whilst this is an understandable response, you need to set this reticence aside and give yourself the best opportunity you can to develop a meaningful and worthwhile research project.

The nature of research into leadership and management often lends itself to the development of a case study approach. Basing your project in or around an organisation and a particular development is a tried and tested method for a Masters Level project. It may well be a method you have employed during

other parts of your course and you can build on the lessons you have learnt earlier. Choosing a case study approach will enable you to develop a particular focus for your project and may provide you with a more manageable topic that is more appropriate to your particular needs. The tight focus for the project provided by a case study, will also enable you to investigate an area in greater depth and reduce the opportunities for 'project drift'. This does not mean that you can ignore the theoretical aspects of leadership and management or ignore the wider issues that might arise from your project, but a case study approach makes it easier to ensure that the focus of the project remains constant.

If you decide to adopt a case study approach a key factor will be the nature of the organisation and this will have an obvious impact on the structure and nature of your project. There are core issues in leadership and management, but different sectors will have different issues and priorities. If you are interested in the public sector and your case study is based around the health service or education, it is likely that the context will be different compared to students conducting research in the private sector in, for example, banking or manufacturing. However, it is important to remember that although the context might differ the principles remain the same. Concepts of the various aspects of leadership are still the same in education and the financial services sector. However, the context and the application of theories of leadership may well differ at any given time. Different approaches and models of leadership might be popular in individual organisations across different sectors at the same time. Each sector will have different priorities and what might be considered best practice in the health service might not be applicable for the retail sector. This does not stop policy makers attempting to import approaches from one sector into another. This might also be an issue you would want to investigate during your research project. At this stage you need to consider the possibility of developing a case study approach during your project, and we discuss in detail the strengths and weaknesses of adopting this type of research methodology in Chapter Two.

The nature of leadership and management

Effective leadership and management have been identified as important factors in the success of any organisation. Having successfully reached the project stage of your Masters Level programme you are probably fully acquainted with the debate surrounding the nature of leadership and management. You could be on a programme in leadership or management or both. The two terms, 'leadership' and 'management', are often used interchangeably. In many cases leadership is included as an aspect of management, but leading is not the same as managing.

At this stage in your Masters Level programme it is not very helpful that there are a number of definitions of leadership. Southworth (1993) describes leadership as a contested concept, and Yukl (2002: 4–5) claims that: ‘there is a continuing controversy about the difference between leadership and management’ and ‘the definition of leadership is arbitrary and very subjective’. According to Bush, Bell and Middlewood (2010: 3) ‘Leadership is independent of positional authority while management is linked directly to it’. Nahavandi (2000) goes further and argues that the two are distinctly different. A focus for these differences can be how leaders and managers deal with change. Cuban (1988: xx) illustrates this:

By leadership, I mean influencing others’ actions in achieving desirable ends. Leaders are people who shape the goals, motivations, and actions of others. Frequently they initiate change to reach existing and new goals. ... While managing well often exhibits leadership skills, the overall function is toward maintenance rather than change.

Nahavandi (2000: 13) argues that: ‘Whereas leaders have long term and future-oriented perspectives and provide a vision for their followers that looks beyond their immediate surroundings, managers have short term perspectives and focus on routine issues within their own immediate departments or groups’.

For any organisation to operate effectively both leadership and management will have to be given sufficient emphasis. It is important to recognise the importance of change and new developments while maintaining effective operational efficiency. In any organisation there is a need for vision from leaders and also effective management towards clear goals.

If we accept that it is often difficult to define leadership and that there is a direct connection between leadership and management, how do you carry out research into this area? According to Burnes (2009: 492–3) researchers into leadership and management can be split into three groups:

- Those who primarily focus on the personal characteristics-traits of the leader
- Those who concentrate on the leader–follower situation, especially the characteristics of the follower
- Those who take a contextual approach by relating leadership and management styles to the overall organisation context and climate.

This provides a useful starting point as you begin to think about the focus of your research project. However, we would argue that this is a limited perspective and there are other dimensions you can consider when you carry out research in the broader field of leadership and management. These include:

- The leadership and management of particular policies and initiatives
- Dealing with change in the organisation
- Leadership and management of resources to ensure efficiency, effectiveness and equity
- Micro leadership of a particular environment or policies.

You will need to decide on a focus for your project and whilst there is clearly overlap between leadership and management it is likely that you will decide to concentrate on one particular area. It is important to remember that your project has to have a leadership and management focus, otherwise you will not be able to meet the criteria that have been identified. You cannot just focus on the policy or initiative you have decided to investigate – your project has to have a clear leadership and management focus. Sometimes students lose sight of that obvious fact because they get carried away with investigating their chosen topic.

The debate about the nature of leadership and management that we have considered in this section is something that you are likely to return to as you proceed through the research process. At this stage we have provided a brief introduction to the issues surrounding the different aspects of leadership and management and we now need to consider the part your own experience can play in developing your research project.

How does your own role relate to the research context?

Every student will bring their own experience and knowledge of leadership and management to their thinking about the focus for their research project. Most students will have some experience of being led and managed and many will also have been in a leadership or management position in an organisation. The project cannot be based solely on your own experience, but it can provide a useful starting point and provide a number of ideas that you might be able to develop. If you are currently working in an organisation and studying part-time or have been fortunate enough to get a secondment then you will be able to draw on your own work experience and organisation when considering research possibilities in leadership and management. You can start by examining your own role within your organisation to see if there are opportunities for research. You might be involved in a management or leadership role, or you might want to investigate aspects of these in the context of your employing or sponsoring organisation. A good starting point is to undertake a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis on your own role in relation to the opportunities for research. If we consider the case of a middle manager in a medium-sized organisation it might look something like the example shown in Figure 1.1.

<p>Strengths</p> <p>Ease of access</p> <p>High level of expertise</p> <p>Improve own practice</p> <p>Personal contacts</p>	<p>Weaknesses</p> <p>Confidentiality</p> <p>Narrow area to investigate</p> <p>Confirmation of existing practice</p> <p>Limited perspective of findings</p>
<p>Opportunities</p> <p>Consider new initiatives</p> <p>Investigate aspects of leadership</p> <p>Raising your profile within the organisation</p>	<p>Threats</p> <p>Ethical issues</p> <p>Having to follow the 'party line'</p>

Figure 1.1 SWOT analysis of your own role in relation to research opportunities

You will have to look at your own circumstances and weigh up the advantages and disadvantages, of conducting research in your own organisation. Drawing on your own experience and situation may help you to overcome some of the difficulties associated with carrying out research. For example, on a practical level access issues should be minimised and you should be able to utilise personal contacts to gather data. However, there are major ethical concerns, relating to confidentiality and potential conflict of interest associated with carrying out research into your own organisation. The major advantage from utilising your own role as the research context is that any findings will have a direct impact on your own performance. If you are carrying out research into leadership and management in the wider organisation, this will have an impact on the overall performance of the organisation. There could be a direct correlation between your research and your role within your organisation. However, you need to be aware that your findings may not be positive in terms of the organisation and you will need to carefully manage any feedback. There might be an expectation that your research supports existing practice within your organisation and this cannot be guaranteed.

You may decide to investigate aspects of your own practice or the wider organisation but you will have to make a number of decisions about the process. In particular:

- What is the context of the research?
- What aspects of leadership and management will you consider?
- Who are the leaders and managers?

Once you have identified a research topic deciding on the context of your research is an important first step. There is a 'golden rule' concerning the context of the research:

Ensure the context is realistic and manageable before you embark on the project.

You may have the opportunity to focus on an existing issue in leadership and management in your organisation or to investigate a new policy initiative. These may relate directly to your own role, but you might want to take the role of an outsider and look at an area not directly related to your position within the organisation. This may limit the immediate personal benefits of the research, but will have wider implications for the organisation. You might want to look outside your own context and compare your organisation with what is happening elsewhere. The broader policy context might be another area you want to consider and again this might enable you to have an impact at a macro level. However, you have to be realistic and to acknowledge that in the vast majority of cases the outcomes from your project will have a restricted effect on the wider world, but nonetheless will, hopefully, have a valuable impact on your own practice and that of your organisation.

You will also need to identify what aspects of leadership and management you wish to look at. Earlier in the chapter we considered the differences between leadership and management. The first issue to determine is whether you are going to investigate leadership or management. In reality it is likely that you will look at aspects of both leadership and management, but you need to be clear about the distinction between the two areas. It may be that you want to look at a particular style of leadership or certain aspects of leadership such as the impact of leadership teams. In terms of management you may decide to look at aspects of management relating to a particular policy initiative or the ways in which effective utilisation of resources is maintained. Whatever your choice of topic, it is important to remember that the focus of your project has to be leadership and management.

Your taught course will have given you the opportunity to look in detail at leadership and management theory and practice. By the time you come to start your project you should be well versed in the different facets of leadership and management, across a diverse range of areas and ideas. For example, you will have considered issues associated with leading people and also looked at the management of financial resources. However, too often students come up with a wonderful idea for a project that is especially important to them in the context of their work, but closer scrutiny reveals that there is little or no connection to leadership and management. Obviously a significant part of the role of your tutor is to get you to focus in your project on leadership and management in theoretical *and* practical terms. Often this does not mean changing your chosen topic; instead you have to identify the aspects of leadership and management that are relevant for your topic.

So, in the initial thinking and planning of your project always remember to clearly relate your chosen area of investigation to aspects of leadership and management. Getting this right at an early stage will save time and effort later on in the process.

Finally there are some important decisions to be made regarding who are the leaders and managers in your area of investigation. Traditional hierarchical models of leadership and management lead us to believe relatively clear-cut distinctions can be made. The reality is often more problematic and in many organisations a confusing picture can often emerge. Models of distributed leadership provide opportunities for leadership to exist at a number of levels. For example, of particular interest for those working in an educational context is the idea of leadership in the classroom, while those operating in other sectors will also recognise there are many opportunities for leadership and management in different contexts across their organisation.

If you are a full-time student with little or no leadership or management experience you have to consider a number of other factors. You will face a set of different problems in identifying a suitable topic for your project. In particular you will not have immediate access to an organisation where you will be able to identify an area to investigate. You may not have the personal contacts to ensure access to an organisation. You will need to think carefully about your chosen area, your own knowledge and experience. The issues surrounding access are significant, and will have an important bearing on the structure and timing of your project, but they are not insurmountable. Your HE institution should have a support network in place to help you with problems of this nature. Your project tutor may well be the best person to help with problems of access. We will look in detail at how you can make the most of available support in Chapter Eight.

However, not being tied to a particular organisation does bring certain advantages and may allow you greater freedom to be more imaginative and critical. You will not have any pressure from an organisation to investigate a particular topic or to validate existing policies. You will not be limited in your choice of topic and can think more creatively and over a longer time period. You may also decide that the focus for your project is more likely to be on a macro rather than micro level. The opportunity to stand back and be truly independent may also enable you to provide a more critical commentary on particular initiatives and policy developments, unlike students who may be constrained by their employing, and in many cases funding, organisation.

In extreme cases your organisation will have directed you to investigate a particular area of concern. However, the reality for most students will be very different and you will be in a position to develop a project related to your own needs. Hopefully your course of study, experience and your own personal interests will have provided you with some ideas about the topic and direction

for your project. In the next chapter we will provide specific guidance on how to identify a particular topic to investigate, design your research and the process you have to go through to get started on your research project.



Summary of Chapter One

This chapter has:

- Provided an introduction to the context and structure of the research project in leadership and management
- Explored the nature of leadership and management as a focus for your research
- Identified special issues in leadership/management research and how these can be related to your particular situation
- Discussed how your own role within an organisation can relate to the research context.



Further reading

Bush, T., Bell, L. and Middlewood, D. (2010) *Principles of Educational Leadership*. London: Sage.
Burnes, B. (2009) *Managing Change*. London: Prentice Hall.