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Version: Published Version

Article:
Gutierrez Ezquerra, AG (2019) Researching an overseas topic at the University of Leeds. Hillary Place Papers, 5. 4. pp. 46-51.

https://doi.org/10.48785/100/240

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Researching an overseas topic at the University of Leeds

Abraham Gerardo Gutierrez Ezquerra, University of Leeds

ABSTRACT: This article aims to provide guidance and motivation to international students in the UK who want to research a problem from their home countries. Lecturers and dissertation supervisors could also be interested in the analysis and recommendations made. The document presents the experiences of an international student at the University of Leeds during the dissertation process. The research project was a qualitative multiple case study that examined the relationship between educational effectiveness and the styles of management and leadership in three public teacher training colleges (TTC) in Mexico via online interviews. In a narrative style, the experiences are described from the perspective of the student, analysing the difficulties faced when studying a problem that is not located in the UK, and the actions taken to solve this. Four main difficulties are addressed: the problem of deciding on a research focus when in a country different to that which you wish to study, complications when constructing a literature review, the many inconveniences of data collection when conducting online interviews, and translation issues during the analysis of the data. To conclude, some proposals are presented that could be implemented at an institutional level to solve these problems.

Designing an international research project at the University of Leeds

Studying for a Master's degree at the University of Leeds can be a rich but demanding academic experience for any international student. All of us go through a process of adaptation, facing cultural and academic differences. Before I arrived in Leeds, I did not consider such differences to be a cause for concern. However, I encountered a wide multicultural community in my International Education Leadership and Policy MA sessions, with classmates from different corners of the world (e.g. Uzbekistan, China, United States, Malaysia, England, Sri Lanka, South Korea and myself from Mexico) and with very contrasting perspectives about education. When listening to my professors and classmates with varying cultural, economic, political, and social backgrounds, I realised that it was going to be a challenging environment in which to develop a research project that could be focused on my own specific context. I questioned myself: is it convenient to study a Mexican theme in the UK? Am I going to struggle to communicate my ideas and intentions to my dissertation supervisor? Is he going be able to provide guidance on my Mexican research topic? Am I going to have all the resources to collect data on the other side of the world?

Despite all the doubts I had about studying the Mexican educational context from the UK, I decided to take the challenge and to face all the difficulties implied when studying something that is situated 8,942 km away and in a different language to English (e.g. not finding enough information, translation issues, and difficulties with collection of data). For my dissertation, I designed a qualitative multiple case study to examine the relationship between educational effectiveness and the styles of management and leadership in three public teacher training colleges (TTCs) in

Mexico. To implement the research process of my dissertation, I followed a framework similar to the one provided by Bloomberg and Volpe (2012, p.29), who propose different stages (choose the research problem, review the literature, design the methodology). This document describes the complications encountered during some of these stages. For example, I first examine the construction of the research problem, then the creation of the literature review, some troubles with the data collection are addressed, and I finally conclude with the analysis and interpretation of data phase.

Construction of the research problem

As students, we look for something significant and relevant for our professional aspirations, this is why choosing a topic for the dissertation can be a troublesome and confusing stage. The module leaders encourage you to opt for an issue from your own context. All students, however, must consider the supervision and data collection difficulties before making a decision. I met many students that preferred a topic that is less strongly related to their interests but that is situated in the UK so that it can be more easily studied. For example, some Chinese students from the School of Education commented that they wanted to study issues on the topic of teaching English in China. Unfortunately, the complication of not being able to travel back and forth to their home countries, made them shift their focus to the study of local British primary schools. I even met a student from Latin America whose supervisor convinced her to move her research context to the UK, because her supervisor felt she did not have the knowledge to guide the student on the topic that she proposed. I think that the University of Leeds academic staff should be more encouraging and supportive when an international student is proposing the study of a topic from their own country. It was less difficult for me because I come from a very specific field (TTCs in Mexico), and I had a very particular question in mind (how are the management models and leadership styles influencing the administrative and academic effectiveness of teaching colleges in Mexico?). However, even with this precise topic selection, I struggled for weeks to define the research problem. This why I advise other students to start thinking about this from the beginning of their Masters course.

Composition of the literature review

The literature reviewed for my dissertation was focused on management and leadership in educational institutions. My supervisor provided me with excellent guidance on the theories about this topic and gave me a long reading list to analyse the theme. However, as postgraduate students, we are expected to make an extensive and exhaustive effort to research and source all the literature on the subject of our project. This was particularly difficult with leadership and management research on TTCs in Mexico. I knew that I could not be too reliant on my supervisor who, being from a different continent, was not going to be an expert on a matter that is not related to his cultural context or academic specialisation. In the beginning, this situation made me feel that I was not getting the right support

from the university. However, this is simply part of the many complications of studying an overseas topic.

After weeks of being completely lost searching through different online sources and Mexican data bases for the appropriate publications and papers, I thought of a better research strategy and looked for help in my own country. For this reason, I contacted a colleague from a TTC in Mexico who has extensive research experience. My contact provided me with the guidance I needed to find the appropriate documents, authors and books to support the study. In addition, she suggested I refine the problem of my dissertation in order to accurately address the real issues that TTCs are experiencing in Mexico.

The literature review is an essential element in developing an understanding of the problem and devising the appropriate data collection methods (e.g. questionnaires and interviews). Therefore, I would advise any international student researching an overseas topic to contact an expert from their own country at the beginning of the project. I want to clarify that I am not suggesting that my supervisor was not sufficiently capable or that he neglected his work, on the contrary he was very supportive and experienced. In this case however, extra support from an outside source was very helpful.

After overcoming the obstacle of finding the appropriate amount of information from a country where you are not physically present, the next barrier is the language. It was evident that if I was going to use papers and publications from Mexico, they were not going to be in English and I would therefore have to translate them from Spanish to English. This may sound an easy task that can be solved using Google Translator, but it is much more complex than that. Online translators frequently misinterpret words or phrases that can change the whole meaning of the author's intentions. An additional complication for publications in foreign languages is that 'studies that are unavailable in English are often excluded from systematic reviews and meta-analyses due to language restrictions' (Regmi, 2010, p.17). This implies that a student could copy another author's work word for word, but in translating it, could avoid penalisation for plagiarism. Upon seeing a fellow student doing this, I queried the ethical implications or sanctions that he may receive. He replied that it was common practice and that no one notices. Therefore, this common practice of plagiarism carried out by international students is an issue that should be considered by the academic staff of the University of Leeds.

Complications with the data collection

As previously mentioned, I designed a qualitative multiple case to study three TTCs in Mexico. The main difficulty with this selection is that the cases were located outside of the UK and scattered across various states of the Mexican territory, a situation that made it impossible to collect in-depth data from different sources, such as observation and face-to-face interviews (techniques that are usually recommended by authors such as Creswell and Pot, 2016 who specialise in research methods). As a result of my geographical restrictions, online interviews

recommended by Bryman (2012, p.477) for interviews conducted at a distance, were the only method of data collection formally used. Despite not being able to have conversational face-to-face interaction with my interviewees, online interviewing allowed me to have 'a full range of visual and verbal exchange… that closely resembles the natural back-and-forth of face-to-face communication, including verbal and nonverbal signals' (Salmons, 2015, p.2). For Kvale and Brinkmann (2015, p.51) the process of interviewing provides precise descriptions of what people have experienced, meaning that even if I was not physically present, the interviewees were able to describe the institutional panorama. Therefore, with the aforementioned online interviews, my study was able to describe the effects that the management and leadership styles had on the effectiveness of the organisation in every institution selected.

Using a purposeful sampling, suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018, p.270) as the best option for a qualitative case study, I selected five respondents from each institution, the objective being to obtain the opinions of leaders (e.g. heads of department, director of campus) and teaching staff (e.g. lecturers and professors). In order to communicate with these hard-to-reach participants, the data was collected using online videoconferencing platforms (Skype, Facebook, WhatsApp). Some authors like Lo Iacono et al (2016) express the benefits of this method by saying that it simplifies the process, with the advantage of saving conversations automatically on the computer. Online data collection however, presented some difficulties such as: technical skills (the researcher and the participants had to possess skills to use the platforms), internet connection (at some point the signal was weak and interrupted the conversations), and a time zone difference of seven hours. (I had to reschedule the interviews a couple of times because of these time differences and most of the interviews had to be carried out late evening UK time). The main complication, however, was that only 12 of the 15 participants expected were successfully interviewed, because even if the participants are selected and scheduled, they were not always available online. Simple advice I could offer to those students implementing online interviews, would be to look for the participants well in advance and establish a closer relationship with the interviewee, helping them to use the internet platforms, and answering any doubts. Furthermore, it would be helpful to schedule interviews at the weekend, so the respondent will have more flexibility on the times they are available or will be more open to being interviewed later at night. In addition, be aware that when you use a phone or computer to communicate with someone on the other side of the world, flaws in the sound and video quality are likely.

Analysis and interpretation of the data

Having completed the data collection, the next step is to organise and analyse the data. For this task I followed a postpositivist interpretative framework, that according to Creswell and Poth (2018, p.66) is when a qualitative researcher believes the interviewees have multiple perspectives. For the analysis of these perspectives, I used the assistance of a computer program (Nvivo 12). The first step of the analysis was to transcribe the interviews (from audio to text). As the interviews were carried

out in Spanish, the transcription was made without assistance of any voice recognition software. Students must be aware that not all languages work properly on this type of software and sometimes it is more frustrating than helpful to use them. The second step was to code the interviews using a grounded theory approach described by Lacey and Luff (2001, p.5), which was done on paper. Before this step I had to decide if I was going to do the coding process in Spanish or in English; each one has its own complications. On the one hand, coding in Spanish (or any language), ultimately requires you to reconstruct the entire process again in English for its interpretation. On the other hand, coding in English requires you to translate all the text from the interview transcriptions. I opted for coding in Spanish, because qualitative studies produce huge amounts of information, therefore, huge amounts of time would be required to translate all the information of 12 interviews. This way, I just had to translate select pieces of data. An additional consideration for the translation of the interviews is that the meaning given to certain concepts and ideas by the interviewee can vary greatly from one language to another, and from one code to another. Therefore, I had to ensure that the ideas from the participants of the study were not changed or lost in translation. I would suggest to any international student that is in this translation and analysis process, to look for help from an expert in your language and in English. I personally found a student from the University of Leeds who was studying Spanish in the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies and who is an English native speaker. She provided me with guidance and advice for the translations.

Recommendations for the academic community of the University of Leeds

I have addressed four main difficulties for an international student researching an overseas topic that in my experience of are the most significant: 1. Problems when deciding on an overseas research issue: 2. Barriers when constructing the literature review: 3. Complications of data collection: and 4. Translation issues during the analysis of the data. So, what improvements can be made by the University of Leeds for its 8,000 international students? Some recommendations that I could make from my own experience are:

- Supervisors should examine more closely the motivations behind the research aspirations of the students. For example, they could pose simple questions like: why would you want to study a topic from the UK and not from your own country? Is it because it is easier or because it is better? What is more, will this topic help you in your professional development?
- Knowing the University has connections with other institutions around the world, why not take advantage of this asset and develop a network for academic support? Professors in different countries could guide and mentor in those topics where it is needed.
- For the University, it would be beneficial to create internal networking spaces between faculties (e.g. the department of Languages Cultures and Societies could provide assistance to students that need to translate documents and empirical data).

Most of us as international students come to the UK with professional aspirations to take back to our countries; ideas that need to be developed to their full potential and projects to build a better future for our communities. I therefore encourage others in the same position as me to not give up on these goals, to not be afraid to face these barriers and to create new content that will be relevant and significant. Students need to be prepared to face these kinds of difficulties or at least know how to deal with these issues. Workshops in the library are a good tool to help and support international students in this situation.

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Author: Abraham Gutierrez: I graduated in 2009 with a BA in Business Management and later obtained a Masters degree in Education in 2013. Since 2012 I have been working as a professor in a teaching college in Mexico. Currently I am studying a Masters in International Education Leadership and Policy at the University of Leeds.

E-mail: abraham.gge@gmail.com