

Student experience podcast transcript: Mark Givan

Could you tell us about your research project? We are particularly interested to hear about the research design and the research methods that you chose.

I was part of a group of six researching public opinions on Scottish independence. The aim of our research was to observe how question structure affects the participant response, and so to do this we chose an experimental research design. We composed two self-complete questionnaires, both identical, except for one question on Scottish independence. In the first survey, a seven-option question was given, offering the participant five possible responses about Scottish independence, as well as a “don’t know” option and an abstaining option. The five main responses varied from making no amendments to Scotland’s position in the UK, reducing Scotland’s devolved powers, increasing Scotland’s devolved powers, Scotland to become independent within the EU and Scotland to become independent out with the EU. In the second survey a simple Yes/No response was offered.

What sparked your interest in the subject you chose to research?

At the time of our project, we were in the lead up to the 2010 general election. This was the first election since the SNP gained power in the 2007 Scottish general election. In light of this, we felt it would be interesting to gauge public opinion towards ideas of Scottish independence and feelings of Scottish identity. While there had already been research done on public opinion regarding Scottish independence, we wanted to observe whether there had been a change in this opinion as a result of the SNP’s administration and given the prospect of a Conservative government. Having seen several examples from surveys where question wording and structure had affected the participant’s response, we wanted to examine the impact of question structure on the participant’s response to a question on Scottish independence.

How did you go about the literature review? Can you run us through the steps that you took?

We began our literature review by using the university library’s electronic resources to access relevant journal articles and reports on public opinion on Scottish independence. We also kept a look out for material that appeared in the media such as opinion polls that were relevant. Once we had gathered sufficient material, each person was delegated literature to review. Once they had read the material each group member reported back to the group with a summary of the information they had gained.

Did you encounter any difficulties at this stage? If so, how did you deal with them?

We didn’t really leave ourselves sufficient time to read the material we had gathered in great depth. Consequently, we found that we were unable to analyze the literature as thoroughly as we perhaps should have.

What prompted you to choose this research design and method?

We chose to use an experimental research design as we needed to observe any difference in participants’ response caused by the question structure. By creating a self-completion questionnaire

with a two-option answer and another with a seven- option answer, we hoped to observe a dilution of support for independence when there were more options.

What factors influenced your choice of research methods?

The focus of our class was on quantitative methods; therefore, our research method was chosen for us in that respect.

How did you choose your sample and what principles guided your sampling?

We chose non-random accidental sampling for the simple reason that we did not have the resources to create a random sample. We chose our sample simply by stopping pedestrians in the street and asking them to complete our questionnaire. We decided to have a sample size of 60 (10 respondents per group member). While this was a very small sample, we did not want to take on more than we could manage.

Did you encounter any difficulties setting up your research?

We found that a few of our questions were unintentionally leading or were based on assumptions. This could have been problematic if they had gone undetected as they could have steered participants to respond in a particular way. Fortunately, upon proof reading our draft questionnaire, we were able to pick up on most of our mistakes. Any others that we did not notice were highlighted by our project supervisor and after some careful re-wording we managed to eliminate any phrases that could potentially bias the response.

Were there any problems when it came to carrying out your research?

We experienced some difficulties getting people to answer the questionnaire. It was also hard to get those who were willing to participate to answer every question. Despite carefully revising the questions, a number of participants did not understand what they were being asked. We found that while the questionnaire was intended to be self-completion, someone needed to be on board to help the participant interpret the questions which was not ideal.

What were your research questions?

Our research questions were “How would people vote on the issue of independence and what aspects affected their decisions?” and “Does the structure of the questionnaire affect the result?”

Did you experience any difficulties with equipment or software at any point?

A few members of the group did not have an adequate grasp of how to use SPSS, which meant that some of information was confused and did not follow a consistent format. As a result, we had to enter the information into SPSS, which again was a very time consuming process!

Do you have any comments about your relationship with your research project supervisor? What role did they have in the process of doing a research project?

Our project supervisor was extremely helpful in the formation of our research project. He helped us get a clear idea of our aims and objectives and to form our research questions and a hypothesis. He was also there to proof read our questionnaires and to highlight any potential pitfalls.

What are the main lessons that you have learned from this process? Are there any aspects of the research that you would like to have done differently?

Given our circumstances and limitations in time and resources, I don't think there is anything that could have been done differently with regard to research methods and design. Had we had more time I would have liked to have avoided the use of a self-completion questionnaire since we often had to offer assistance to the respondents in order to enable them to understand the questions. I would have preferred to have conducted interviews, as this would have given us a clearer insight as to whether the wording of a question significantly affected the participant's response. This might also have given us a greater understanding of the reasoning behind participant's answers.

If you had one bit of advice to give to students who are about to begin working on their research projects, what would that be?

DO NOT leave things late! Our research project suffered through a lack of urgency meaning that we did not have as much time as we would have liked to write up our report. Too much was left to the last minute which meant that what we produced was not necessarily to the standard we were capable of.

How did you go about analyzing the data?

We compared our statistics with those found in recent literature to identify any changes in public opinion regarding Scottish independence. We also compared the results of the first survey's question on independence against the second survey's question on independence.

How did you go about writing up your research project?

The project report was completed in a similar manner to the way in which we had completed the literature review. Each section of the report was delegated to a group member and once each member had completed their section, the group met to bring the individual sections together and to edit our material so that it was cohesive.

What problems did you encounter at this stage, and how did you succeed in overcoming them?

Our group had difficulty communicating with each other due to the fact that there were often group meetings that some group members were unable to attend. The consequence of this was that the individual members did not know what the rest of the group was doing with their section of the report. When all the constituent parts were brought together, we found that material had been repeated in several places which proved problematic to try and rectify.