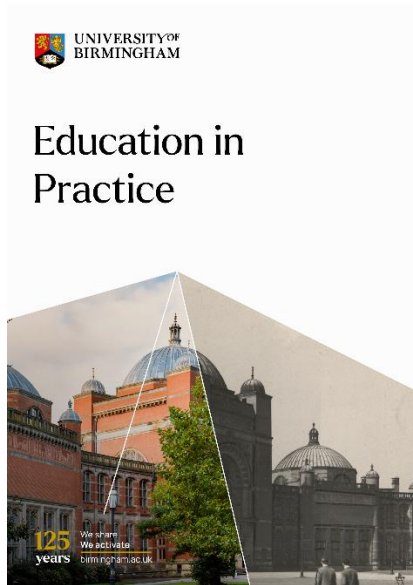




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Development of a learner-centred research methods textbook for international business master's students

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Abstract

Despite the large number of research methods textbooks, there remains a market niche for an accessible physical book specifically written for international master's students in business and management. This paper presents a case study of a recent research methods textbook proposal for this market niche which has been accepted by a reputable British publisher. It follows the style of a publication on proposal writing written by one of the authors and covers the remaining phases of doing a research project. The paper explains the context and rationale for a new book, the style and structure of the proposed book and feedback from prospective readers and the publisher. Conclusions are drawn on the direction of future textbook writing for international master's students.

Introduction

According to HESA (2026), between 2019 and 2025 the number of international students undertaking a UK master's in business and management subjects increased by 92% compared to a 78% increase across all subjects. This disproportionate growth in business and management programmes reflects their global marketability and the international recognition of UK qualifications in these fields. Furthermore, over the same period, HESA data indicates that the non-EU proportion of postgraduate taught master's students in business and management subjects increased from 59% to 74%, representing a significant shift in classroom composition and necessitating pedagogical approaches that respond to increasingly diverse educational backgrounds and cultural contexts. Despite recent visa changes introducing stricter post-study work provisions and increased financial requirements, demand for UK master's degrees from international students remains high, demonstrating the resilience of the UK's reputation for postgraduate business education.

Most UK business and management master's courses still include a dissertation as a large proportion of their credit, typically accounting for one-third to one-half of the total programme weighting (Healey, Jenkins, and Lea, 2014; Todd, Smith, and Bannister,

2004). This reflects the continued emphasis within UK higher education on inquiry-based and independent learning. As Healey, Jenkins, and Lea (2014, p. 16) argue, “the dissertation remains the cornerstone of the master’s curriculum, providing a unique opportunity for students to engage in independent knowledge construction.”

This continued emphasis on the dissertation reflects the sector’s commitment to developing students’ independent research capabilities and critical thinking skills, competencies that are highly valued by employers globally. However, the dissertation component also represents a significant challenge for many international students who may be encountering this form of extended, independent academic work for the first time. The transition from taught modules with regular guidance and structured assessments to the relatively autonomous nature of dissertation research can be particularly steep for students whose prior educational experiences have not prepared them for self-directed scholarly inquiry.

Most international master’s students are classified as using English as an Additional Language (EAL), which presents not merely linguistic challenges but also rhetorical and epistemological ones, as academic English embodies particular ways of constructing and presenting knowledge that may differ significantly from conventions in students’ first languages (Ballard and Clanchy, 1997). Many are used to rote learning and have limited experience with research methods or extended academic writing before beginning their courses, having developed their academic identities in systems that prioritise knowledge reproduction over knowledge creation (Ballard and Clanchy, 1997; Kinnell, 1990). They are also generally strategic learners, focusing on achieving good grades in their assessments (Tait, Entwistle and McCune, 1998), an approach that is entirely rational given the competitive graduate employment markets they will enter, but which can lead to surface-level engagement with research processes if not carefully guided. This strategic orientation means that resources which explicitly connect research activities to assessment criteria and demonstrate clear pathways to success are particularly valued. Despite behavioural changes in the modern digital age, including widespread use of online resources and digital learning platforms, a preference for physical books persists (Alsaeedi *et al.*, 2021), suggesting that tangible texts continue to offer cognitive and practical benefits such as easier annotation, reduced screen fatigue, and the ability to cross-reference multiple sections simultaneously.

Many international master’s students are therefore looking for a single physical book that will guide them to success in their dissertation, serving as a reliable companion throughout the research journey from initial topic selection through to final submission. However, the popular books on the market are often long and detailed, frequently exceeding six hundred pages and covering research methods comprehensively across multiple disciplines. While this comprehensiveness is valuable for building general research capacity, these texts are not strategically focused on students’ coursework outputs, typically a research proposal and a final thesis, with specific word limits, formatting requirements, and assessment criteria. They also do not provide

academic writing support or soft skills guidance covering crucial areas such as managing supervisor relationships, maintaining motivation during challenging phases, time management strategies, or dealing with common emotional challenges such as imposter syndrome and research anxiety. Dissertation completion depends not only on methodological competence but also on personal resilience and effective self-management. Furthermore, international master's students often seek out example dissertations to understand what is required, but an over-reliance on these can lead them to copy inappropriate surface-level elements such as chapter structures or section headings without understanding the underlying logic, or worse, to inadvertently plagiarise phrasing or argumentation styles (Pecorari, 2013).

Whilst there has been a move towards more concise business research methods books (such as Saunders and Lewis, 2025), study skills books for doing master's dissertations (such as Cottrell, 2026) and subject specific research methods books with some coursework advice (such as Collis and Hussey, 2019) there remains a market gap for a single subject specific book which provides step-by-step guidance and is written from the perspective of international master's students.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an account of the practice-based research undertaken to develop an evidence-based proposal to write such a book which was successfully submitted to a reputable British publisher. It begins with a conceptual framework followed by an explanation of our methodological approach and data analysis method. The research activity is then presented comprising of the development of the proposal rationale, feedback obtained from students on another book with a similar pedagogical approach and the design of our proposed textbook. The response from the publisher is then narrated followed by our reflections, conclusions and recommendations.

Although these findings informed the design of a textbook, the underlying pedagogical principles are transferable to wider educational practice. Clear scaffolding, authentic examples, integrated academic writing support and explicit attention to students' confidence and self-management could equally inform the design of dissertation modules, supervision practices and other research methods learning resources for international master's students.

Conceptual framework

Drawing on inquiry-based learning (Khalaf and Zin, 2018) and an academic literacy perspective (Lea and Street, 1998), the proposed textbook is designed to scaffold students' transition from knowledge consumers to novice researchers. Inquiry-based learning emphasises structured engagement with authentic research problems, while academic literacy recognises that disciplinary writing practices must be explicitly taught rather than assumed. For international master's students, textbooks that integrate methodological guidance with language support, worked examples and

reflective activities reduce cognitive load, make disciplinary conventions explicit, and support confidence in independent research.

Methodological approach

The purpose of the case study research was to persuade the publishers to allow us to write the book. The data collected and analysed is therefore limited to this purpose. Our paper therefore adopts a reflective practice-based descriptive case study (Price, 2017). The case centres on the design, development, and publisher evaluation of a learner-centred textbook proposal. The activity comprised identifying a pedagogical gap, designing the textbook structure, obtaining feedback from students and the publisher, and iteratively refining the proposal until it was accepted. Data consisted of the student and publisher feedback which was generated during this process together with the authors' reflective observations.

Feedback was obtained from 18 master's students enrolled on MSc Business and Management programmes at the University of Birmingham during the 2024–25 and 2025–26 academic years. Students represented programmes including MSc Management and MSc Human Resource Management. Participation was voluntary, and comments were provided after students had used the proposal-writing textbook to support their coursework.

Students were invited to provide brief written reflections on how they had used the textbook, which aspects they found most and least useful, and suggestions for the title of the new dissertation book. Comments were collected through end-of-module evaluations, supplemented by verbal feedback during teaching sessions.

Students were informed that their anonymous comments could be used for educational research and publication purposes. No identifying information has been included, and all quotations have been anonymised. The feedback was collected as part of the routine module review process, which constitutes a standard educational evaluation activity.

Data analysis

Student comments and publisher feedback were analysed using a simple thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Given the practice-based nature of the project, the purpose of the analysis was not to generate new theoretical insights but to identify recurring perceptions of value within the proposal-writing textbook that could inform the design of a companion dissertation textbook.

The student comments were read repeatedly by both authors to achieve familiarity with the dataset before being coded according to their primary meaning and focus. Initial codes included references to clarity, accessibility, confidence, practical usefulness, academic writing support, examples, structure, and direct application to assessed coursework. These codes were then compared and grouped into broader categories. Through discussion between the authors, overlapping categories were

consolidated into five overarching themes: clarity, accessibility, confidence-building, practical applicability, and academic writing support.

The final themes were selected because they occurred consistently across the student comments and aligned closely with the pedagogical objectives of the proposed textbook. The analysis therefore provided an evidence-informed basis for design decisions by identifying those aspects of the original textbook that students found most supportive of their learning. Rather than treating feedback solely as an evaluation of the existing text, the data were used as a source of design guidance for the development of the new proposal.

Publisher feedback was analysed separately and used to evaluate the pedagogical and commercial viability of the proposal. Particular attention was paid to comments relating to market positioning, audience needs, and differentiation from competing titles. The student and publisher datasets were then considered together to identify areas of convergence between learner needs and publishing priorities.

Although the dataset was relatively small (18 students and one commissioning editor), the purpose of the study was to generate practical insights to inform textbook development rather than produce statistically generalisable findings. The emphasis was therefore placed on identifying recurring patterns that could support an evidence-based design process.

Proposal rationale

The authors submitted a proposal for a new research methods book for international master's students to a UK publisher. This book will specifically address the post-proposal submission phases of a research project, with a particular focus on the dissertation stage. Building on the successful approach used in the previously published proposal writing book on business research projects (Samuels, 2023), this work aims to provide a practical, structured, and supportive guide tailored to the needs of international students navigating complex research tasks.

The current market situation is summarised in Figure 1. The books available on the market are divided into two dimensions: a focus on a specific discipline versus an academic skills focus; and a traditional approach versus a contemporary one. Example books in each category are critiqued. In general, they are rather long for our target audience and do not contain examples of actual student work.

Traditional discipline specific research methods textbooks	Traditional academic skills development textbooks
Example (Saunders et al., 2023)	Example (Wallace and Wray, 2021)
Critique:	Critique:
Not focused on doing the coursework	Not focused on doing the coursework
No student examples	No student examples
Long	Rather long
Contemporary discipline specific research methods textbooks	Contemporary academic skills development textbooks
Example (Saunders and Lewis, 2025)	Examples (Collis and Hussey, 2019; Greetham, 2019)
Critique:	Critique:
Covers contemporary issues (e.g. AI)	Either coursework focused or subject specific, but not both
Not focused on doing the coursework	No student examples
No student examples	Rather long
More concise but still rather long	

Figure 1: Market analysis of existing research methods textbooks

In addition, international students also encounter rhetorical expectations, unfamiliar academic conventions and differing epistemological assumptions that are rarely addressed explicitly in conventional research methods texts.

In summary, existing textbooks may be comprehensive yet insufficiently accessible for learners requiring integrated methodological and academic literacy support. They can appear inaccessible due to their length and their content does not generally resemble the writing that students are expected to create.

Student feedback

Feedback was collected from informal written comments provided by international master's students who had used our proposal-writing textbook (Samuels, 2023), together with written responses provided by the commissioning editor during the proposal review process. The student comments were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), with recurring themes identified relating to clarity, accessibility, confidence-building, practical applicability, and academic writing support. Representative quotations are presented below to illustrate each theme.

Clarity

Students valued the book's clear, step-by-step explanation of the research proposal process.

"The book broke the process down into simple, achievable steps. I finally understood how to move from a topic idea to a full proposal." (2024 MSc International Business student)

Accessibility

Students found the concise language and practical examples accessible, particularly for those using English as an additional language.

"As an international student, I found the examples incredibly helpful." (2024 MSc Human Resource Management student)

Confidence-building

Students indicated that the structured guidance increased their confidence and reduced anxiety about independent research and academic writing.

"The structure helped me to stay focused and reduced my anxiety about writing in academic English." (2024 MSc Human Resource Management student)

"Before using the book, I wasn't confident about where to begin my proposal. The clear guidance helped me approach each stage with much more confidence." (2025 MSc Management student comment)

Practical applicability

Students valued guidance and examples that could be applied directly to their own research proposals and assessed coursework.

"The examples made it much easier to relate the research methods to my own dissertation topic rather than just reading about the theory." (2025 MSc Management student comment)

"I found the step-by-step approach particularly useful because I could apply each chapter to the section of my dissertation I was writing." (2025 MSc Human Resource Management student comment)

Students appreciated the integration of academic writing guidance throughout each stage of the research process.

"The explanations helped me understand not only what to include in each section but also how to write in the style expected at master's level." (2025 MSc Management student comment)

"As an international student, I found the academic writing advice especially valuable because it explained things that were unfamiliar to me." (2025 MSc Human Resource Management student comment)

Summary

Overall, these comments suggest that the learner-centred and supportive design of the proposal writing book resonated strongly with international students across disciplines, reinforcing the rationale for a companion volume focused on the dissertation phase.

More importantly, the thematic analysis directly informed the design decisions incorporated into the new proposal. Firstly, feedback relating to clarity and confidence-building reinforced our decision to retain a highly structured step-by-step format that guides students through each stage of the dissertation process. Secondly, comments regarding accessibility influenced the decision to continue using concise language and to include worked examples drawn from authentic student work. Thirdly, feedback highlighting the practical applicability of the book supported the decision to organise chapters around the stages of dissertation completion rather than around abstract methodological concepts. Finally, students' positive responses to integrated academic writing guidance informed the decision to embed writing support throughout the text rather than presenting it as a standalone chapter. In this way, student feedback functioned not only as validation of the original concept but also as a direct influence on the pedagogical design of the proposed textbook.

Book design

Based on the feedback received from students and their appreciation for our previous book (Samuels, 2023), the proposed book will combine several key features to enhance learning and application.

Firstly, the proposed book will have a clear, step-by-step design. It is structured into five parts and 16 chapters as shown in Figure 2. Part 1 sets the scene for doing a dissertation. It assumes students have already submitted a proposal following the guidance in our previous book (Samuels, 2023) but summarises some of the key information here.

Part	Chapters
1. Setting the scene	1. Your current research project status 2. Academic writing 3. Managing the process 4. Writing your dissertation introduction
2. The critical phase	5. Doing your full literature review 6. Writing your dissertation methodology 7. Designing your data collection instrument

3. The action and analysis phases	8. Collecting and preparing your data 9. Qualitative data analysis 10. Quantitative data analysis 11. Writing up your findings
4. The creative phase	12. Writing your discussion 13. Writing your conclusion 14. Revising and editing your dissertation
5. Post submission	15. Presenting and defending your dissertation 16. Future work based on your dissertation

Figure 2: Structure of proposed research methods book

Parts 2 to 4 cover the phases of doing the research project, blending advice on carrying out the research with advice on generating the dissertation thesis. Part 5 covers relevant issues after students have submitted their dissertation theses. This structure allows for a clear, step-by-step progression from proposal submission to dissertation completion.

Secondly, it will be discipline-specific and include examples and guidance directly relevant to students' fields of study. These examples will be in the form of extracts from a limited number of real students, accompanied by tutor feedback, providing readers with concrete illustrations of common challenges and effective strategies.

Thirdly, the writing style will be simple, concise and accessible style that avoids overwhelming the reader. Fourthly, academic writing training will be integrated throughout, reinforcing the development of critical writing skills necessary for high-quality dissertations.

Finally, soft skills support will also be emphasized, covering important aspects such as building productive relationships with supervisors, managing time, and maintaining motivation. The book will take a strategic approach, guiding students through the preparation of coursework components and research outputs, with the aim of improving both process and outcomes.

Publisher response

The publisher feedback was equally encouraging. The commissioning editor described the concept as "innovative in its integration of methodological guidance, academic literacy, and pastoral support, adding that the approach aligns perfectly with current trends towards inclusive pedagogy and internationalisation in higher education publishing. The editor was so impressed with the concept that they are now planning

to create an edited series of textbooks using the same engaging, student-centred style.

Following our successful application to the publishers, our book is due to be released in the Spring of 2027. The publishers' agreement and positive feedback indicate their confidence both in the pedagogical approach and its commercial implications.

Reflections and conclusion

Dissertations remain an important component of most business and management master's courses, serving as a culminating academic experience that demonstrates students' research capabilities and subject mastery. Despite evolving educational landscapes, international recruitment to these programmes remains strong, bringing together cohorts of students from varied cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds who enrich the learning environment but also present unique pedagogical challenges.

These international students need guidance in multiple areas – from understanding research methodologies and academic writing conventions to navigating ethical approval processes and managing their time effectively – and are actively looking for a one-stop resource to support them comprehensively through the complex process of doing a research project.

Whilst the academic book market offers numerous titles on research methods and dissertation writing, existing books do not fully target this need, often focusing narrowly on methodology or writing skills without addressing the broader support requirements of international students undertaking postgraduate research. Our forthcoming book is specifically targeted at this underserved niche, providing integrated guidance that addresses both the technical and pastoral dimensions of the dissertation journey, though we anticipate that its accessible approach and comprehensive coverage may also prove applicable to a wider audience, including domestic students and those studying at undergraduate level who would benefit from structured, supportive guidance through their research endeavours.

Beyond textbook development, this case study highlights broader principles for supporting international master's students. Resources that are structured around authentic assessment tasks, integrate methodological and academic writing guidance, and acknowledge the wider challenges of independent research may help improve both student confidence and learning outcomes. These principles could be adopted within dissertation modules, supervisory practice and institutional learning support.

This study was limited by the purpose of the research and the small sample size. Its evaluation has been based on persuading a publisher rather than more objective research criteria. Whilst the main finding of the study is an apparent strong market precedent for a concise, holistic, accessible international student-centred business dissertations textbook, a short volume will obviously lack the depth of existing longer textbooks.

Recommendations

More student research methods textbooks should be written from the perspective of international students with a focus on their coursework requirements, clarity and conciseness.

In order to develop holistic textbooks, academics should partner with central support staff who have a greater understanding and awareness of non-academic issues, such as academic writing and soft skills development.

Programme teams should review dissertation modules to ensure that methodological guidance, academic writing support and research process skills are integrated throughout the student journey rather than being treated as separate activities.

The student voice needs to be heard more clearly in the design of research methods textbooks, such as incorporating them in market research and including actual student examples with feedback.

In addition to textbook design, UK HEIs need to consider more carefully the pedagogical needs of their international students undertaking dissertation research. This can be achieved by forming better partnerships and developing teaching materials which adopt these stated principles.

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