Identifying a topic for a psychology dissertation: A process map for students

Andrew J. Holliman & Tim Jones

Identifying a 'promising' topic for a psychology dissertation is widely recognised as one of the most important, challenging, and stressful parts of the research process. Students are required to work in a relatively unstructured way (compared with other modules) to independently identify a topic that is not only appropriate, of personal interest, ethical, and achievable, but also rooted in psychological literature, methodologically sound, and with originality (for higher marks and publication potential). This typically occurs concomitantly with other modules, assessments, and obligations, within a restricted timeframe, placing heavy demands on students (and sometimes their supervisors). Although there are extensive resources on 'doing a psychology project' and on 'choosing a dissertation topic' we feel there remains scope to more effectively support students' topic selection in a way that does not circumvent the independent nature of the activity and process. In this article, we present a 'process map' (the first of its kind to our knowledge) that may assist students to independently identify a 'promising' topic for their psychology dissertation. We believe this will be of great value to undergraduate and postgraduate psychology students, dissertation supervisors, and other module and course teams. Given the timing and importance of the dissertation module, this resource may also lead to enhancement of the overall student experience.

Keywords: *Dissertation Topic; Supervision; University/College Students; FE; HE.*

A NUMBER OF psychology programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate level are designed to meet the Standards for the Accreditation of Undergraduate, Conversion and Integrated Masters Programmes in Psychology (British Psychological Society, 2016), which are closely linked to the Higher Education Subject Benchmark Statement for Psychology (Quality Assurance Agency, 2016). According to each, teaching and learning at degree level should involve a transition from initially supported and guided study to more independent and self-directed study. As such, psychology students will often complete a series of practical reports to develop their research and investigative skills, which culminate in an independent empirical project (dissertation) reporting on a substantial piece of research.

The dissertation is arguably the most important and challenging module on a psychology degree. It is typically the most substantial piece of work that students are required to complete in terms of length, study hours, and credit weighting. There is also evidence (e.g. Sinkovics, Richardson & Lew, 2016) that the dissertation may be unique in its ability to enhance student employability; for instance, working on a project under supervision whilst retaining independence is very much akin of work life. The dissertation is, therefore, one of the most considerable and important parts of a psychology degree (and students are aware of this – see Lane, Devonport & Horrell, 2004). When coupled with the expectation that students should work more independently and in a less familiar and unstructured way relative to before, this often results in feelings of self-doubt, need, and heightened anxiety. Indeed, research has shown that students' academic confidence tends to fall over the course of study (Sander, 2009).

In our experience, and consistent with some evidence (e.g. Lane et al., 2004), one of the most important, challenging, and stressful parts of the dissertation is formulating an idea that has 'potential'. On the surface, identifying a dissertation topic is easy work. In the very first exchange between

student and supervisor (which may set the tone of the relationship for the remainder of the process), it is not uncommon for a student to ask something like: 'I'm thinking of researching iPad use and obesity – is this a good idea?' Sadly, this is often met with a response such as: 'What does the literature have to say about this supposed iPad-obesity link? How might they be connected theoretically? What evidence is there linking (or not) iPad use and obesity? What design might be employed? How might you measure iPad use and obesity? Who would take part? What procedure would you follow? How does this make an original contribution to current understandings? Is this research even ethical?' A less forgiving supervisor might even send the student away to do some reading before any further discussion of the subject. Either way, this is an uncomfortable situation for the student and supervisor. It is not the best first impression of the student's engagement with the research and it is not the best use of everybody's time (which is often capped or at best limited on dissertation modules). On the surface then, identifying a dissertation topic is easy; however, identifying a topic with 'potential' (i.e. where supervisory questions like those above can be answered by the student with a degree of confidence) is a far more demanding task.

Other factors combine to make it difficult for students to identify a 'promising' topic. For example, identifying a topic typically occurs at the beginning of the research process (although it ought to be a somewhat recursive process) when students are less experienced and less knowledgeable of the subject matter. Students often feel the need to identify a topic of personal interest within a restricted timeframe (and concomitantly with other modules, assessments, and obligations) in order adhere with university requirements, for example, in order to meet some assignment demand (perhaps a project outline or research proposal) or to gain ethical approval. They are expected to do so more independently and with less support and direction than they are used to getting. They also do this with knowledge that they will likely be tied to the project (often deemed to be the most important on their degree) for a number of months, which adds pressure to 'get it right'. Students wishing to develop an idea capable of achieving the highest marks, and with publication potential, must also ensure that the idea is rooted in psychological literature, methodologically sound, and with originality.

In our experience, these factors (heightened demands coupled with increased independence and reduced structured guidance and support) often combine to create feelings of self-doubt, need, and anxiety (sometimes on behalf of the supervisors too). These feelings may also be intensified for those with additional education requirements (e.g. dyslexic students), who have been found to have lower academic confidence (Sander, 2009). It is perhaps unsurprising that many students struggle to develop a 'promising' idea in the time available. Students sometimes develop an idea only to realise it lacks potential at a much later date: this can result in a complete change of idea, which is not always problematic, but further restricts the amount of time available. Other students may stick with their original idea even though they come to realise it has a major flaw rendering it incapable of reaching the highest marks. Students often express regret about their choice of topic, and may fall behind as a result. Each scenario here is likely to result in a more negative learning experience for the student. In sum, we feel there is scope to more effectively support students to navigate the earliest stage of the research process and, specifically, to identify a 'promising' dissertation topic in a way that does not circumvent the independent nature of the activity and process.

A 'process map' for identifying a topic for a psychology dissertation

In this section, we present a 'process map' (the first of its kind to our knowledge) that may assist students to independently identify a 'promising' topic for their psychology

dissertation (see Figure 1). This navigation tool, which should be used in conjunction with the accompanying information presented below, is designed to support students through three major steps (i.e. identifying a general area of investigation; preliminary literature review and narrowing the subject area; more extensive literature review and idea refinement) which culminate in a supervisory meeting (Step 4). If followed successfully, students should be able to take ownership of their research and formulate an idea (topic) that is appropriate, of personal interest, ethical, and achievable, and also, importantly, rooted in psychological literature, methodologically sound, and with originality. They should be able to do this is less time, with less reliance on their dissertation supervisor, and with reduced anxiety.

Anecdotally, we have found this 'map' to be successful in achieving its aims, although there is a need for more empirical evidence of its effectiveness. It should be noted that the 'map' focuses solely on formulating an idea and identifying a 'promising' topic for a psychology dissertation. It does so in a fairly brief, digestible manner and is not designed to be extensive or all encompassing. It is also presented as 'one approach' that may support students with the earliest stages of the dissertation process (we do not discredit alternative approaches that may be valuable). For a more extensive account of some of the ideas presented here, and for guidance on some of the other important aspects of the dissertation process, such as gaining ethical approval, literature reviewing, collecting and analysing data, and writing up, we suggest students consult other resources (e.g. Wood, Giles & Percy, 2012).

Step 1: Identifying a 'general' area of investigation

Few (if any) resources would encourage students to generate a specific idea at the start of the research process prior to engaging with the academic literature. Instead, students should first seek to identify a 'general' area of investigation that can then be narrowed down (later steps). Some students may already have a 'general' idea of what to focus on prior to starting their module or degree; for example, they may wish to explore 'iPad use and obesity' (earlier example) or perhaps 'predictors of wellbeing', 'hostage negotiation', or 'self-esteem and dyslexia'. Some students may have no idea of what to focus on while others may have several different ideas in mind (it's usually this one!). The purpose of this first step in the process map is to enable students to critically reflect on their own needs and desires in order to independently identify a 'general' area of investigation (i.e. a topic, or series of connected topics) that is personally appealing. To do this, students are encouraged to consider each of the following, which may help to ensure their needs and desires are sufficiently met:

1. Students should first make sure the general area (subject) is *relevant*, for example, if the dissertation relates to a psychology module (as it does here given this article is conceived for psychology students) then the idea must be rooted in psychological literature focusing on human thinking and behaviour in some way;
2. Students should then consider what they find *interesting* and *enjoyable;* for instance, a student may have really enjoyed reading about 'tattoo addiction' or maybe they enjoy going to the tattoo parlour themselves and always wondered why. The student might try to think of a module or lecture they found particularly interesting. They might also consider the research areas of lecturing staff (sometimes there are opportunities to join and build upon existing staff projects, for example). Some students find it useful to consult a general psychology text to consider some of the different sub-disciplines (e.g. Developmental Psychology) and subject areas (e.g. infant attachment) to help them understand what they find personally appealing. It is of

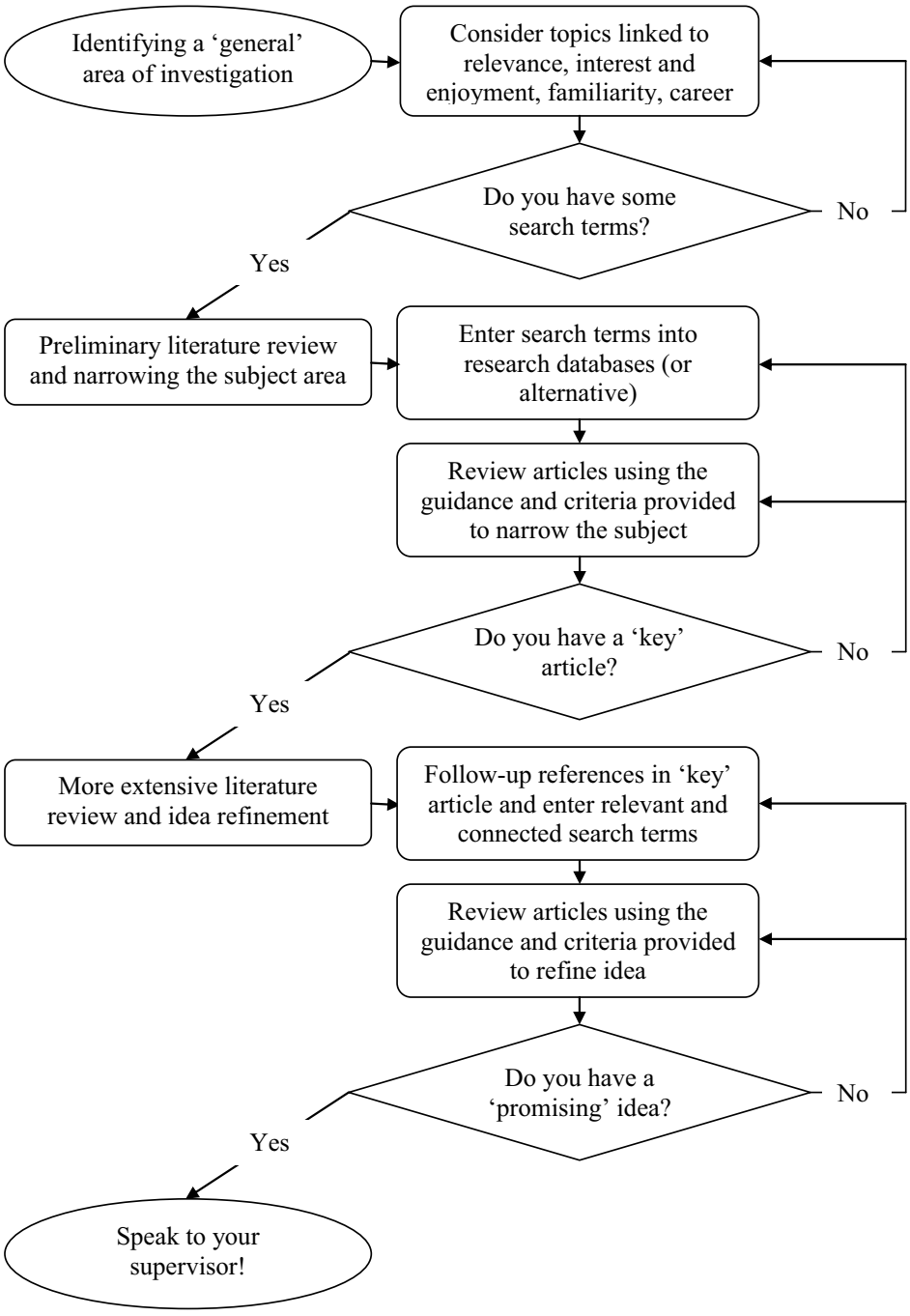

Figure 1: Identifying a topic for a psychology dissertation: A process map for students

paramount importance that students identify (and later select) a topic that they are passionate about as it must sustain their attention and commitment for a number of months. A student who decides to research a topic that they are not interested in has truly fallen at the first hurdle (and it happens). Relatedly, some students select a topic based more on personal attributes of their potential supervisors (e.g. those who may be perceived as 'nice', a 'soft touch', or a high marker). We discourage this for two reasons: first, the student might not end up with that particular supervisor (allocation decisions are usually made by module leaders); and second, as stated previously, it is of paramount importance that the 'topic' (rather than supervisor) is personally appealing.

3. Students may consider a topic they are (somewhat) *familiar* with as it is easier to learn and write about something they already feel knowledgeable of rather than on something that feels like a foreign topic. We caution, however, research that relates 'solely' to a student's personal journey (e.g. eating disorder or sexuality), without any accompanying academic material, although there is sometimes scope to incorporate such experience into the research process (e.g. in some qualitative studies). It is also important to acknowledge and appreciate that even for more familiar topics, a great deal of learning takes place as part of the research process;
4. Students may also consider a topic that is connected to their present or future *career*. As part of the research process, students can gain a great deal of relevant experience in the area (e.g. knowledge of relevant research evidence and theory, key issues, debates, perhaps some experience as part of the data collection process) that may support their present job and/or help them to gain employment once the degree is completed. For example, if a student works part-time in a local school, and wishes to become an Educational Psychologist, they may find it useful to focus on a topic related to children's learning in a schooling context or perhaps supporting children with additional educational requirements. The dissertation will provide relevant research evidence and theory on the topic as well as practical experience with the target group. Such work sometimes builds networks and other connections that can lead to employment opportunities too.

Having considered the above, students should be able to identify a handful of general and somewhat connected areas (terms), such as 'education', 'learning', 'dyslexia', 'literacy', 'intervention', 'wellbeing', for example. If they can do this, then they would have successfully completed the first part of the process and can move onwards with their connected areas (now called 'search terms') to Step 2. Students who are unable to identify a handful of search terms initially, may decide to proceed to Step 2 with fewer search terms, or they may wish to further engage with the sources of information advocated here.

Step 2: Preliminary literature review and narrowing the subject area

The main purpose of Step 2 is for students to use the search terms identified in Part 1 to identify a 'key' journal article on the topic that can provide a catalyst for a more extensive, though not exhaustive, literature review (Step 3). This is often a 'eureka' moment – when students find a 'hidden gem' (key paper) amongst the abundant literature. It is the moment where a student identifies some psychological research evidence and theory that addresses a research aim or set of research questions or hypotheses that (a) the student finds personally appealing (connecting with those areas identified in Step 1) and (b) are topical and worthy of further investigation. This helps to ensure that the idea that is ultimately formulated is

rooted in psychological literature (even in just one article for now) and that research on the topic is still warranted as implied by its recent publication in an academic journal (linked to originality).

To begin Step 2, students should start by entering the 'general' terms identified earlier (Step 1) into a research database (e.g. SCOPUS, PsycINFO, or Web of Science) or GoogleScholar (which sometimes links to these databases). It is strongly advised, at this stage, that the search is limited to peer reviewed journal articles that are published in the last 1–3 years. This is because the literature identified can then be considered more credible (journal articles are the gold standard) and topical (it is unlikely that inquiries about topics published in the last three years have been fully resolved). Additionally, more recent articles are likely to capture and reference important preceding research (the most recent and seminal) which can then be targeted during a more extensive literature review (Step 3).

Having entered the search terms, it is likely that a great number of articles will be identified. Students should start by observing the title of each article and the focus here should be on identifying a title that resonates with the students' needs and desires as identified in Step 1 (although a degree of flexibility is usually healthy). When an appealing article title has been identified, students should proceed to read the abstract, which summarises the research article in a short and more easily digestible paragraph. If having read the abstract, the student is no longer interested in that particular article (this often happens) then it can be discarded and the student can continue to look for another article. If, however, the student is still interested, then they may wish to read the rest of the article. Students may find it particularly useful to focus on the end of the introduction (usually where the study rationale and research questions or hypotheses are presented) and the first line of the Discussion (which usually summarises what was found in lay terms). The student can then proceed to read other areas of the article, such as the method (what was done and how they did it) and results (what was analysed and found). Additionally, linked to the concept of 'originality', students might locate in the Discussion section some acknowledged limitations of the research along with some future directions. These can often form the basis of an 'original' study providing a rationale for the present work (elaborated on further in Step 3).

At this stage, when an article has been identified that meets the students' needs and desires (see preceding commentary) it is helpful to list the following information about that article (Wood et al., 2012):

- What is the full reference for the article?
- What were the research aims, questions, and/or hypotheses?
- What populations were being sampled, i.e. who participated in the research?
- What methodology was employed (i.e. design, materials/measures, procedures)?
- What was found?
- What theories were proposed to set up the study and make sense of the results?
- Whose research is cited as central to the study?

This information can help students to ensure that there is sufficient psychological research evidence and theory on the topic, gain an understanding of the methodology (e.g. it might be useful to know whether the measures used in other research are available for their own study), and have some preliminary ideas (elaborated on in Step 3) about originality and how some proposed research might 'fill the gap' in the literature – hallmarks of a potentially publishable piece of work. Students' initial ideas (Step 1) are usually narrowed at this stage drawing inspiration from the focus, approaches, and methods of the literature and the 'key' article that has been identified.

Students who struggle to locate an article that meets their needs and desires (see previous commentary) may wish to continue

searching for other articles or they may wish to slightly amend the search terms they are using (this is not uncommon and sometimes reading the literature can help students to generate new search terms that may support them with this process). However, for students who are able to locate a 'key' study and report the information listed above, they can proceed to Step 3, where they will carry out some additional reading and refine their research idea (topic).

Step 3: More extensive literature review and idea refinement

Having identified a 'key' journal article and narrowed their original idea, it is now time for students to carry out a more extensive literature review (but still not truly extensive at this stage). The purpose of this third step is that, upon completion, students should be able to draw on a handful of articles (at least) to further refine their dissertation idea. Students will look beyond the single 'key' article in Step 2 to gain a more complete understanding of what is being studied right now (i.e. what is topical), what questions are being asked and addressed, the kinds of methods that are being used (e.g. who participated in the research, the constructs chosen, how they were measured), the kinds of analyses employed, and also any limitations and future directions. Successful completion of this step will enable students to not only identify a topic that meets their own needs and desires (Step 1) but to also be confident that the formulated idea is rooted in a recent literature (not just a single article), methodologically sound (perhaps making judgements based on methodological strengths and weaknesses of the other work identified), and original (adding something new to the literature).

To begin Step 3, students should start to read around the 'key' article identified. A good place to start would be to chase up the references included in that article (refer to Step 2). Students might also search around the topic in the databases using the subjects/terms or even the author(s) details. Sometimes it is possible to also find out which articles have cited the article in question; thus, assisting the identification of relevant research. When relevant articles are found the list of questions presented in Step 2 should once again be completed. As soon as a handful of journal articles have been identified, students may seek to refine their own ideas. In order to consolidate their own idea(s), it may be helpful for students to ask themselves the following questions:

- Does this topic continue to meet your own needs and desires?
- What research aims, questions and/or hypotheses are being explored in the body of research? Might you be able to explore this further or perhaps research something connected but slightly different in some important way? Can you identify your own aims and research questions and/or hypotheses?
- How has the subject been explored in other studies (consider the study time, access to the participants, access to measures, the procedure, any ethical issues [students will likely be required to adhere to both Faculty Research Ethics Guidelines and the Codes of Conduct and Ethical Principles set out by the British Psychological Society], possible analyses to be employed). Would such an approach be 'achievable'? Might there be scope to partially replicate or adapt the methodology making some important amendments? Do you have a proposed methodology (sample, measures, procedures, ethical issues) and proposed analysis?
- Are there limitations and future directions identified in the articles, and what are they? Are you able to identify any shortcomings yourself? Might a project be developed that builds on this existing work, but addresses (overcomes) some of these limitations? Perhaps the same area could be considered from a different perspective? A partial replication of a study but with well-argued improvements and extensions can form the basis of an original idea.

If a student feels confident that they can respond to each of the above, then they might well be onto something 'promising' – the key objective of this process map. It may be challenging at this step (but not always impossible) to try and construct a sentence or two making a case for their own research, which builds on the articles identified. They might try to develop a 'rationale' for the work along with an argument as to how and why this could be considered an original idea. A student who successfully reaches this point should now proceed to Step 4, and contact their supervisor. They will now be approaching them not only with a general idea (worthy of Step 1), but with an idea rooted in some psychological research evidence and theory (literature), with knowledge of the methods employed, proposed analyses, and even arguments about how the proposed research is original (Steps 2 and 3). Students who are unable to respond to each of the above initially, may continue reading and reviewing alternative journal articles, or may consider making slight amendments to the search terms that are to be entered into research databases or alternative.

Step 4: Speak to your supervisor!

While we acknowledge here that it may be useful to contact your supervisor sooner, or to perhaps have a 'hello and welcome' kind of greeting at the outset, it would be beneficial if you could approach your supervisor very well prepared (having completed all preceding steps noted above). You will be in a position that will enable you to answer the common questions raised by a supervisor at this stage (see earlier example of the student-supervisor exchange). Additionally, regardless of what the supervisor thinks here or earlier, it is important to note that in the dissertation itself, decisions and arguments will need to be supported by citations to research evidence and theory (literature) in order to provide a more compelling and critical basis to your decision making and associated arguments. Following the preceding steps will enable you to do this more confidently.

Conclusions

In this article, we have presented a 'process map' that may help students to navigate the earliest stages of the research process and to independently identify a 'promising' topic for their psychology dissertation. It will be 'promising' for a number of reasons: it will meet their own needs and desires; it will be based on a series of 'key' journal articles; it will draw on methods used in existing research or make important improvements on prior work; the proposed data collection methods will be informed; the proposed analysis may be known; and the student may be able to argue how and why the proposed research makes an original contribution to the literature. It is important to note that the idea a student brings to their supervisor might change after consultation (subtle deviation is perhaps expected); however, students who attend this meeting equipped-with the knowledge and understanding from the three preceding steps will be in a very strong position and would have made a 'promising' start to the research process.

Further, we anticipate that the 'map' may lead to enhancement of the overall student experience. Course evaluations often take place during the dissertation module and, in our experience, students often refer to their supervisory experience, and the level of support, when passing judgement. The self-guiding 'map' presented here might enable students to feel more empowered with greater perceived self-determination. Engagement with the 'map' (and perhaps a reflective log, which we also advocate) might enable students to more explicitly reflect not only on the research process (and academic grade), but also on how they have grown, managed their supervisor, worked under supervision whilst retaining independence, and what they will take forward with them into their future work or study. We therefore believe this experience may assist the development of important 'workplace skills' and enhance their employability.

Anecdotally, we have found this 'process map' to be successful in achieving its aims;

however, we welcome research, and discussion from our peers, about the effectiveness of this 'map' for supporting students to independently identify a topic for their psychology dissertation.

Acknowledgements
We would like to thank Dr Francesca Walsh and Dr Georgia Niolaki for their valuable feedback on this article.

The authors
Andrew J. Holliman (andrew.holliman@coventry.ac.uk); and **Tim Jones** (tim.jones@coventry.ac.uk) School of Psychological, Social and Behavioural Sciences, Coventry University.

Correspondence
Dr Andrew J. Holliman, School of Psychological, Social and Behavioural Sciences, Coventry University, Coventry, CV1 5FB.
Email: andrew.holliman@coventry.ac.uk.
Tel: +44 (0) 24 7765 8208
Fax: +44 24 7765 8300.

References

British Psychological Society (2016). *Standards for the accreditation of undergraduate, conversion and integrated Master's programmes in psychology*. Leicester: Author. Retrieved 2 September 2017 from www.bps.org.uk/system/files/Public%20files/PaCT/Undergraduate%20Accreditation%202016_WEB.pdf

Lane, A.M., Devonport, T.J. & Horrell, A. (2004). Self-efficacy and research methods. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education, 3*(2), 25–38.

Quality Assurance Agency (2016). *Subject benchmark statement for psychology October 2016*. Gloucester: Author. Retrieved 2 September 2017 from www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/SBS-Psychology-16.pdf

Sander, P. (2009). Current developments in measuring academic behavioural confidence. *Psychology Teaching Review, 15*(1), 32–44.

Sinkovics, R.R., Richardson, C. & Lew, Y.K. (2016). Enhancing student competency and employability in international business through Master's dissertations. *Journal of Teaching in International Business, 26*(4), 293–317.

Wood, C., Giles, D. & Percy, C. (2012). *Your psychology project handbook: Becoming a researcher* (2nd edn.). Harlow: Pearson.