

Change Makers: choosing your research method(s)

The Change Makers application form asks:

Please identify the possible research methods that you might use on your project

What is a research method?

A research method is a systematic approach to gathering and analysing data to answer a research question.

Using a research method makes your research robust and useful, because researchers before you have worked out their strengths and weaknesses, and refined them to improve their reliability. For the same reason, using an established method will also save you time!

Just as with the research question, you may be familiar with some research methods from your own discipline. You may have done research yourself. There are many methods you can use, and you can also combine methods.

We don't expect you to know everything about your method(s) when you propose your project.

This guide should give you enough information to complete your application form, but there are other online resources available.

Think about...

What methods have you encountered in your studies so far? Would any of them be useful?

Choosing a method: Can you use it to answer your research question?

This is the primary consideration when picking a research method: will the information you can get from this approach actually tell you what you want to know? Here's an initial question:

- **Is your question about objective things?**
Are there clear 'correct' and 'incorrect' answers? If so, the kind of data offered by (for example) people reporting on their beliefs is not going to be the right tool for you. It won't generate valid results.
- **Is your question about causation, explanations, meanings, ideas, beliefs and values, behaviours, impact, perceptions?**
Is it about *how* or *why* something happens?

Think about...

What kinds of data will you need to fully answer your question? Do you need *objective factual* data, or more *subjective, explanatory* data? Will you need to count things, ask people questions, observe things?

Quantitative and qualitative methods

Your sense of *what kind of question you're asking* often leads into a decision on whether to use qualitative or quantitative methods (or both).

Quantitative methods collect and analyse numerical data:

- They can *seem* more reliable, valid, less subjective
- It can be easier to interpret the data, and to present the findings
- But they need to be carefully designed - issues of underlying assumptions, and whether the data gathered is representativeness, can affect their validity

Qualitative methods work with non-numerical data:

- They can look more subjective, and less rigorous, than using quantitative methods
- They can be denser to interpret and harder to present findings
- But they can offer a lot of richness, nuance and insight

(These are simplified accounts of both 'sides'. For example, you could construct a *quantitative* study that gathered information about *subjective opinions*, using a Likert scale.)

Carrying out the project

- **Is the scale appropriate?** If you're using a survey, would you need 1000 people to respond, to get a valid result?
- **Do you have access** to the people, places and datasets you want to use?
- **Will it be possible** to follow the method **in the time available** (include both gathering data and interpreting findings)? e.g. longitudinal studies are great, but less possible
- **Is it ethical?** Is the method likely to cause harm, or require deception?
- **What strengths do your group members already have** in terms of research and analysis? Do you know how to use a particular method, or software?

Combining methods

You may find that you wish to use more than one method to tackle different aspects of the question. Doing this could create something that is stronger/clearer/more persuasive (if the findings agree) or more complex/subtle/interesting (if they seem to conflict).

Change the method or change the question?

Choosing a method may involve some back and forth between refining your research question and selecting methods.

If you're drawn to using one method and it doesn't fit your question, maybe it's your question that needs to change slightly – maybe it doesn't describe what you're really interested in finding out. You don't have to stick to the exact question and method you give in your application.

Don't panic if you don't know everything about your method(s)

You can continue to fine-tune your method as your research progresses: your mentor will be able to give you advice. For now, choose a method that you believe:

- Will help you to answer your research question
- You can complete in the time available
- You can use ethically
- You will find interesting to do

Some research methods

We've identified some common research methods, but Change Makers is open to you using other approaches.

Surveys – good for finding out *what* is happening - getting closed-ended questions answered by a lot of people.

Can give clear, quantitative data, which is relatively quick to interpret. Can be hard to obtain useful response rates.

Interviews – good for more in-depth, open-ended information from a smaller group of people.

Good for answering *why* or *how* something is happening. Can create a very large quantity of data that needs to be coded and interpreted.

Questionnaires – something like a survey but more in-depth with more qualitative aspects.

Focus groups – like an interview but for a group, and considers interaction and consensus.

Observation - great for finding out people's behaviour - what they *really* do, rather than what they say they do.

Conversely, it can't tell you much about motivation or meaning. Be aware that there are ethical issues around observing people without their full consent!

Ethnography (of communities, places, online communities) – is somewhat like observation, but takes a 'richer' approach including aspects that may not be included in a simpler observation. More concerned with how people *make meaning*.

Media analysis – of news, commentary, advertising, publications. Can include visual and textual aspects.

Think about...

How useful could this method be for your research question? What *can't* it reach? Any problems? Any ethical concerns? Have you used the method before?

Research methods continued

Discourse analysis – a focused close reading of a body of texts.

Mapping – observing things in physical space to answer questions.

Network analysis – a kind of conceptual mapping, to find out about the interaction of groups.

Drawing on **existing datasets** – you may not want to gather your own data. You can use existing datasets (and combine them).

Case studies – in-depth investigations of a group, company, situation etc. Often uses several methods in the same project.

Comparative analysis – involves finding the distinctions between two comparable alternatives to understand both better. Again, often uses several methods.

You can contact us at lse.changemakers@lse.ac.uk with any questions you have about the application process.