

How to Write Good Higher Education Research Questions

OFFICE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

Questions are the hinge-pin of your higher education research.

Here are sample questions from a published Q1 research paper:

1. How salient is the theme of assessment (in the context of graduate employability) to students, alumni, employers and educators?
2. How do the perspectives on assessment and graduate employability vary between the four stakeholder groups?

Kinash, S., McGillivray, L., & Crane, L. (2017). Do university students, alumni, educators and employers link assessment and graduate employability? *Higher Education Research and Development*, doi:10.1080/07294360.2017.1370439.

Here's how to write your own good questions for higher education research!

Come on – spin the wheel and begin today. Use this wheel as a checklist.

What you Want to Know (WWK) People sometimes get mixed-up between their overall research questions and the methods (e.g. survey) questions they are using to gather data. Keep these two types of questions mentally distinct.

Literature Review Funnel (LRF) Your research questions do not come out of nowhere. Start by doing your literature review and identify gaps or opportunities.

Plain Language Wording (PLW) Avoid complexity and jargon. Choose words that people outside of your discipline should comprehend.

Avoid Sneaky Constructs (ASC) Some words are loaded (e.g. perceptions) and have specific meanings and ways of measuring. Unless you are certain this is where you need to go, avoid them.

Define your Key Terms (DKT) Other words need to be included in your research questions as tags or contextual identifiers and links. From the example above, these words are assessment and graduate employability. Remember to define these terms in your research paper.

Compelling & Interesting (CI) Good research questions make people respond – Yes, I wonder. They want to continue-on to read your paper and see what you discovered.

Open-Ended (OE) Closed-ended questions derive Yes or No responses. This gives you little scope for investigation. Seek open-ended questions that allow you to explore.

Measurable (M) Questions are posed in order to direct your research. They must be phrased so that you can determine the response to those questions. For example, you can never know whether someone has understood and therefore cannot use this term in a research question.

