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My colleagues and my filing cabinet: insider research access for part-time post-graduate students.

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Abstract
Access is described as "one of the key and yet most difficult steps" in organizational research (Bryman and Bell, 2007:444). Typical definitions of business research access in the methods literature emphasise physical entry to premises and the establishment and maintenance of relationships with gate-keepers and potential respondents (Bryman and Bell, 2007:444; Coffey, 2006:1). This implies that the part-time student conducting insider research at their own workplace has nothing more to do to achieve the necessary access.
The initial stage of this study bears out the necessity of testing the anecdotal model that students conducting insider research do not apply for research access in their employing organizations sufficiently early.
It indicates that there are a number of bases for this, including misunderstanding of what research access means and a belief that negotiation of research access is unnecessary for insider researchers.

1 Introduction
Access is described as "one of the key and yet most difficult steps" in organizational research (Bryman and Bell, 2007:444). It is typically defined as the process of "gaining and maintaining entry" to an organization's "privately managed space" for the purposes of conducting research by interacting in some way with the people involved in it and/or by examining its documentation. It includes the establishment and maintenance of relationships with gate-keepers and respondents (Bryman and Bell, 2007:444; Coffey, 2006:1). This quite typical definition of access emphasises physical entry to the organization's premises, which seems to imply that a researcher who is conducting research at their own employing organization has nothing more to do to achieve the necessary access as it is not specified that this applies to external researchers rather than insiders (who are not mentioned).
This paper is the first output from an empirical study of the research experience of students on a post-graduate degree programme. The Background sets out the context of the project by presenting the nature of problems observed related to access which led to the establishment of this project. The Literature Review will critically evaluate the advice on access in research methods texts alongside a survey of a small number of studies of research practice and reflection on research methods recounted in empirical work. Discussion of this study's research methods will lead to an initial analysis of data from the first stage of the study. The Recommendations will focus on indications for the future development of the study.

2. Background to this Study
Students on the MA Personnel Development programme at Westminster Business School are required to carry out a research project within the Human Resources Management field. As these are mainly part-time students in full-time employment, they tend to become insider researchers at their own workplaces. The project arises from experience of having supervised the dissertations of a number of these students and particularly fourteen conducting insider research in the academic year 2005-6.
It emerged in supervision sessions and also from written reflection on methodology that many of these fourteen students experienced problems with research access, sometimes to the extent of

being barred from surveying or interviewing their own colleagues, or from consulting company documents, including those which they were required to use in their working role – in their "own" filing cabinets - after they had made considerable efforts to design a study which depended on these methods. The short time practically available to these part-time students means that this late discovery can be disastrous for the successful completion of a project. Approximately nine months before the project deadline the students are required to submit an assessed 2500 word Project Synopsis, or plan. Eleven of these fourteen synopses lacked any mention of research access.

Student A[1] found it "frustrating" (p.1) to be denied access to demographic data after she had left the firm that was the subject of her research. One of the appendices to her completed project was a three-week email exchange with an HR Advisor dating from the day she left the company. The student said that her line manager had given her permission to use this material. However, despite the student's repeated assurances about confidentiality, the HR Advisor replied eventually that she was unable to forward the information, without offering any reason for this decision ("Student A", 2006).

Student B[2] met an unexpected obstacle in her late attempt to gain access to research the very popular topic of the new payment system in a well-known, national, public sector organization. Unlike previous students who had been able to survey staff in other "divisions", she was required to make a formal application through the [divisional] ethics committee. The on-line instructions (which she made available at the time) indicated that the usual time for this process was sixty days, presenting a serious problem in the timing of Student B's work. The method that she adopted to circumvent the delay was to send questionnaires directly to respondents' home addresses ("Student B", 2006)[3].

This experience led to the development of an anecdotal model of the part-time post-graduate insider researcher failing sufficiently to address the issue of research access because as an insider they believe this not be a necessary step in the process – the "my colleagues and my filing cabinet" perspective.

One may conjecture that students presume their employer's provision of course sponsorship to imply the approval of any type of study activity dictated by the university. It is quite likely that students consider "their" organization not as a private or "closed" setting but as their community, where they experience freedom to come and go and to interact with the people they meet in furtherance of various work and non-work objectives (Bryman & Bell, 2007:444). They may confuse access in their particular role as an employee with a kind of universal access which would include permission to carry out research. These assumptions may also lead to students disregarding routine advice from their supervisors to ensure that they have the necessary permission to collect the required data.

3. Literature Review

"The blunt fact is that without access research is not possible" (Denscombe 2002:71). Social scientists' preparation to study certain social groups in public places usually involves gaining acceptance by the group concerned. Organizational research may be distinguished from such community research: Bryman and Bell (2007:444) contrast public "open settings" with private "closed settings". Although research in public places is itself not easy, it is at least possible to begin without waiting to be granted formal permission. The study of work poses a particularly acute problem of access as an additional barrier between the researcher and the data is imposed by the "bounded nature" of organizations. (Bryman and Bell, 2007:444; Mason, 2005). Organizations are, moreover, increasingly disinclined to grant research access (Bryman, 1989:2;

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[1] This student has consented to her inclusion in this work and has agreed the wording of both the description of her case and her project's entry in the References list.

[2] Student B has not responded to a request to include her experience in this essay. The description of her case and the entry relating to her project in the References have therefore been anonymized to a greater degree than those of Student A.

[3] Reflection on the ethical implications of the supervisor's acceptance of this strategy is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the significance of this particular experience was the impetus which led to its writing.

Crompton and Jones, 1988). Research access, therefore, is a particularly pertinent issue to business students.

Bulmer's (1988) comment that this is a "generally neglected topic" is almost as applicable to more recent research-methods textbooks today. Access (including related terms such as "gaining entry" and "gate-keeper") is not addressed by some well-respected texts (such as Cassell and Symon, 2004; Fisher, 2004) and receives hardly more than parenthetical attention in others (such as K.Punch, 1998). These texts tend to discuss the details of how research should best be conducted in the assumption that it will be possible.

The separate topics of access and insider research, which are not often addressed by either the research-methods or the empirical literature (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007; Bulmer, 1988), are even more rarely integrated. Disregard of the importance of seeking formal access seems, therefore, to lie partly in the assumption by the students, seemingly encouraged by their (mis)reading of some well-regarded research texts, that organization members are able to initiate research activity within it with very little preamble regarding permission. This misunderstanding recalls the "fallacy of easy access", a term coined to describe the attitude of feminist women researchers who are said to assume that gaining research access to other women poses no difficulties (Reay, 1995:205).

Ironically, the advice to outsider researchers often extols the value of being introduced to the organization by a sympathetic employee, using contacts made previously during a work placement, or getting appointed as an employee oneself in the organization (Bryman, 1989; Bryman and Bell, 2007; Hartley, 1994; Corbetta, 2003). Brewerton and Millward (2001:44) go so far as to say that for student researchers with such contacts gaining access is "not particularly problematic". The prevalence of this kind of assertion together with the rarity of caveats about additional barriers to insider access in these texts may be partly responsible for the students' confusion about this topic.

Judith Bell takes care to demonstrate the need for the insider researcher to request formal research access. At the beginning of a chapter entitled "Negotiating Access and the Problems of 'Inside' Research", she cautions that "no researcher can demand access to an institution, an organization or to materials" and she advises seeking permission early in the research process (Bell, 1987:42).

Brannick and Coghlan (2007) distinguish between primary and secondary access. It is primary access which refers to getting into the organization and once outsider researchers have this it is relatively easy for them to continue to access the data they need. Empirical articles chart difficulties experienced in physically entering the organization's premises and successful techniques employed in maintaining relationships (e.g. Buchanan et al, 1988; Ram, 1999). For insider researchers, who already have primary access, secondary access to the data they need is more problematic. They may need to negotiate access not only to the relevant departments but also to "hierarchical areas" where confidential information may perhaps be off limits to people at their grade. There may also be fears of "breaks of trust" (Alvesson, M. 2003:167; Brannick and Coghlan, 2007:67).

Research access in organizations takes place on at least two levels. The permission of higher management tiers is necessary for access to the organization in general, its people (employees, clients and so on) and its documents; and lower managers control access to areas under their authority. As it is vital to gain the support of critical gate-keepers it is essential to ascertain who they are as soon as possible (Bryman, 1989; Hartley, 1994).

For the maintenance of access, "buy-in" must be achieved at all relevant levels. Individuals hold access to the data that they can provide including questionnaire or interview responses. In any event continued "regulation of access" can be complex if it involves a number of levels of the organization (Brewerton and Millward, 2001:47; Flick, 2002:55). Bryman (1989) describes situations where access is agreed at a lower level but is overturned at a higher level. Alternatively access agreed by higher management might be resisted at lower levels (Robson, 2002).

Access involves a number of aspects of research ethics. Serious attention needs to be given to anonymity and confidentiality, both of the organization as a whole and of the individuals within it. The extent of these depends on the research topic and the circumstances; it is crucial therefore to

ascertain what this means in practice for the particular study and to be prepared for greater difficulty in achieving confidentiality as an insider researcher (Bell, 1987; Jankowicz, 2005). Insiders should consider the implications of being in possession of confidential data on their working relationships within the organization. (Robson, 2002). Conflicting roles as researcher and as colleague could lead to "ethical dilemmas" as to whether information should be shared in the course of one's job or kept confidential as part of the research project (Holian, 1999:3). Ethical issues specific to the stage of gaining access include the participant's rights to privacy, not to be pressurised into participating, to be free to withdraw at any time and to be fully informed; and the researcher's right not to be assigned an unsuitable topic by the gate-keeper (Saunders et al, 2007:180).

Maurice Punch (1998) cautions against lying, breaking promises and stealing documents; his advice to researchers to consider the consequences of their actions should perhaps be particularly borne in mind by insider students who are more likely to be tempted to consider alternative routes to data when denied officially sanctioned access.

An additional ethical aspect which is relevant to access is that the researcher should not leave the field "in disarray". Organizations which permit access deserve gratitude and a satisfactory research experience rather than, for example, assurances broken or papers borrowed and not returned (Bell, 1987:137). In this regard, Holian (1999) also discusses her disturbing experience of "backlash" in attempting to study issues that members of the organisation preferred not to discuss. An unacceptable research experience, moreover, is likely to lead organizations to deny access to subsequent applicants.

The increasing disinclination of organizations to grant access (Bryman, 1989), even to some insider researchers, is attributed to three major reasons. Firstly, organizations are concerned that they cannot spare resources to help researchers, including their employees' time on non-productive activity, such as being interviewed or making documents available (Bryman, 1989; Buchanan et al, 1988; Saunders et al, 2007). Secondly, concerns about anonymity and confidentiality often cause organizations to refuse research access or sometimes to restrict it to particular sources. Bryman cites the example of a researcher who was permitted to attend all management meetings except those discussing strategy (Bell, 1987; Bryman, 1989; Buchanan et al, 1988; Saunders et al, 2007). Thirdly, the growth of organizational research, fuelled partly by the increase in universities setting project work, means that whereas this was once a novelty firms are now "deluged" with such requests (Bryman, 1989:115; Buchanan et al, 1988:55). They may have only recently been the subject of a research project, Buchanan and colleagues comment that they have themselves in the past been denied access because "somebody else got there first". Some companies simply have a policy not to cooperate with researchers, and, as we have seen, the organization may have previously suffered a poor research experience (Buchanan et al, 1988:55; Bryman, 1989).

To address the problem, it is clear that not all the issues in access are within the student's control. Early application would identify these in time for countering proposals to be made.

Although the student may be confused by the unacknowledged differences between insider and outsider access in the research-methods literature, much of the advice on gaining access addressed to the outsider researcher is relevant to the insider. The would-be researcher should apply as early as possible, allowing plenty of time; they should establish who is the relevant gate-keeper; and reservations about time allocation and confidentiality should be taken very seriously (Buchanan et al, 1988; Crompton and Jones, 1988; Saunders et al, 2007). They should be polite but specific about the type of access that is necessary and the data they require, although it is also possible to use a strategy of developing access incrementally (Saunders et al, 2007). Benefits to the organization should be emphasised (Saunders et al, 2007); in practice insiders are usually able to choose a topic that is relevant and useful to their organization. It is also advisable to offer a summary report of findings to be written especially for the organization, rather than a copy of the university project (Saunders et al, 2007).

4. Objectives for this Study

The reasons for the problems with insider research access seem to be very complex. Firstly, the student is at fault for failing to address this issue sufficiently early in the research process. However, this itself may be the result of not realising the importance of formally seeking access

as an insider researcher at all. The two main concerns identified are the mistaken belief of students that they may carry out research projects at will within their "own" organizations and the relative paucity of advice in the available research methods literature on the matters of organizational research access in general and, more importantly, on insider research in particular. In most of the texts that students may consult about access they read that physical access is the goal and may be achieved with some kind of internal contact. It is difficult not to be sympathetic with the student's plight.

The questions that are required to be addressed by this research project are:

1. Do students recognise the importance of gaining formal access to data sources in order to carry out their insider research?
2. Do they seek this permission at an early stage of their research activity?
3. Are students refused access to data sources on which their planned study depends?
4. If so, does this occur early or late in the research process?
5. What are the effects of such refusal?
6. In what way could research methods teaching and supervision practice seek to avoid the disappointing outcome of access being refused when it is too late for the student concerned to change their plans.

This paper is intended to focus on questions 1 and 2.

5 Research Methods

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the issue of insider research access among the university's part-time post-graduate business students to build on the anecdotal model derived from personal experience of supervision and marking of a small proportion of them, it seems fitting to carry out a systematic study of the experience of the 2007-8 cohort of the MAPD.

In view of the topic under investigation, it is important to describe the process of gaining access to conduct this study. The concept was formulated after marking projects which included those of Students A and B. I discussed the proposed research with the School's Research Director, who expressed very warm enthusiasm, and with the Leader of this Project Module, who was also supportive.

A mixed method approach seems to be the most appropriate to both measure the extent of the problem and to seek to understand both the reasoning behind students' decisions to act as they do and the effects of being denied research access. Hammersley (1996, cited in Bryman & Bell, 2007:645) suggests three approaches to mixed methods research which all apply to this study: Triangulation; Facilitation - one research strategy, qualitative or quantitative, aids research using the other; and complementarity, when the quantitative and qualitative methods enable the "dovetailing" of data. The "sequential" use of methods will also provide increasingly rich qualitative data to enable the building of an understanding of students' experience with the gaining of research access in their own employing organisations (Saunders et al, 2007:146). The first method, and the only one which has thus far been completed, is the reading of the students' submitted Project Synopses (whole population). This was intended to be followed by a Questionnaire with a sample composed of those who sent their Project Synopsis (see Recommendations below for further reflection on this) and an Interview with an illustrative sample of experience described by the first two methods.

Students in the 2007-8 cohort of the large MAPD course were requested to take part in a study of students' experience of the research process. They were asked to email their Project Synopsis to me and to indicate whether they were prepared to take part in the later questionnaire and interview stages. They were assured that submitting their Project Synopsis for the study would have no bearing whatsoever on the mark they received. The students were also guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. This is achieved by assigning them numbers and omitting all "identifiers" such as gender, name and business type of their organization, and terms used in the organisation (eg role titles). It should be noted also, that the students were not told that the focus of the study is "Access" due to my concerns that this might lead to a biased sample.

The request was made once in an email and then was left on the MAPD course Virtual Learning Environment. In all, twenty-five students responded by sending their Project Synopsis. All of these also indicated their willingness to participate further in the study.

6 Data

The twenty-five Project Synopses have been scrutinised carefully for instances of discussion of research access issues in their employing organisations.

Seventeen (68%) have not mentioned assess issues at all.

Five of them have mentioned it: two have said that access is arranged, two have said that it will be addressed and one has rather obscurely assured the reader that "access was initially sought" (Student 5) without mentioning whether this attempt has yet been successful

Student 10, in a section entitled "Access Organised" describes the planned process of sending questionnaires from the HR department and arrangements for their return. S/he says, "Access to the population and to the company data has been agreed with the organisation". Student 22, in a similar vein includes an "Adminstration of the Survey" section in which s/he states, "The survey will be sent […] by the Head of […] to all the 360 participants (arrangement approved)".

Students 8 and 21 similarly demonstrate an understanding of what is required but have not yet taken the necessary steps, "A letter addressing the HR Director […] will seek permission to perform the research" (Student 21).

Student 5, however, has taken a vaguer approach. A section entitled "Access and Sampling" begins, "Access to a population of […] was initially sought. However, it is unclear what this means in practice as it is followed by, "As they have recently gone through a […] process [they] are more likely to respond to a survey of this type than [other staff]". Here Student 5 may be referring to response rate – discussion in the research methods literature of the various levels of access seems to imply that it concerns the willingness of individuals to participate (see above, Brewerton and Millward, 2001:47; Flick, 2002:55).

The remaining three Synopses are rather complex examples. Student 18 recognises the importance of access. S/he is intending to conduct both inside and external research in the form of a survey of internal managers and members of competitor organisations. Access to the competitors has been arranged through a forum of which Student 18 is a member. However, there is no mention at all of the need to arrange access for the insider part of the study.

Student 12 intends to ask colleagues to respond to a questionnaire and to take part in interviews. S/he is also hoping to gather data from "HR records and exit interview notes". The last section of this Synopsis is entitled "Potential Problems". Student 12's note that "There may be time and access restrictions when trying to carry out the interviews with existing employees e.g. due to holiday or business commitments" suggests very strongly that s/he is confusing access with response rate. In the last sentence of the Synopsis s/he expresses the view that asking the views of former staff may elicit a "more realistic view" than that gained from exit interviews carried out by the company, "However", s/he adds, "the company may not be supportive of ex-employees being contacted for information." Here Student 12 is planning a project in which s/he already sees major flaws and yet seems unwilling to take responsibility for this by making an early request for access to this sample or re-considering this element of the research design.

Student 3 is planning a study in a local government organisation, which requires interviews with line managers and HR staff and also a great deal of staff records. S/he feels that some data will be available from external websites and through requests made under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. S/he also notes that "the [organisational] intranet and internet will provide access to much of the internal secondary data needed." The use of the term "access" in this context, with no suggestion at all of a request for permission to use this HR Department data, strongly indicates that Student 3 does not understand what access is about. In this student's case, unfortunately, s/he seems to believe that "access" is addressed and that therefore s/he has carried out all the pre-study checks.

7. Discussion

This initial analysis of the data gathered so far in this study demonstrates the seriousness of the problem previously identified in an anecdotal and piecemeal fashion. In this sample of twenty-five

students, only two have arranged access as insider researchers. A further two seem to recognise what is required and their experience will be traced in a later stage of the study. Twenty-one students are either confused to a greater or lesser degree about what research access entails, or have provided no evidence that they have considered it at all.

Research access for these students is mainly related to insider access as they are conducting projects in their own employing organizations. None of them discusses the particular difficulties to which this might give rise. Student 18, indeed, describes her/his intentions with regard to requesting access to external organizations but the lack of mention of insider access seems to stem from an understanding gained from the research methods text advice that physical entrance to the organization is all that is required.

The case of Student 12 seems to relate to problems experienced by Holian (1999) where a backlash occurred in reaction to the issues she was exposing.

The anecdotal model of the "my colleagues and my filing cabinet" perspective is borne out but it seems clear that this is not the only reason for the difficulties experienced. The confusion experienced by some of the students seems to stem entirely from a misunderstanding of what access means in a research sense.

8. Brief Conclusions

The initial stage of this study bears out the necessity of testing the anecdotal model that students conducting insider research do not apply for research access in their employing organizations sufficiently early.

It indicates that there are a number of bases for this, including misunderstanding of what research access means and a belief that negotiation of research access is unnecessary for insider researchers.

9. Recommendations for the next stage of this Study

This study is still on-going. It was intended to follow the first stage of reading the Project Synopses with a Questionnaire and then an Interview. All of the participants in the first stage indicated a general willingness to take part in one or both of these stages. However, it has become clear from the data generated in the first stage that a Questionnaire would be inappropriate. The next stage of the study should seek details of the participants' later experience in their research projects and should probe into their understanding of insider access. Therefore the next stages will take place after the completion of this cohort's projects and will take the form of comparing the marks achieved in their projects with their level of understanding of insider access at the Synopsis stage and semi-structured interviews about their experience as insider researchers.

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