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Project Research in Information Systems

A Student's Guide

**Tony Cornford
Steve Smithson**

*Department of Information Systems
London School of Economics and Political Science*

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It is beyond the power of the human intellect to encompass *all* the causes of *any* phenomenon. But the impulse to search into causes is inherent in man's very nature. And so the human intellect, without investigating the multiplicity and complexity of circumstances conditioning any event, any one of which taken separately may seem to be the reason for it, snatches at the most comprehensible approximation to a cause and says: 'There is the cause!'

War and Peace, Leo Tolstoy

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Preface

Students undertaking research projects within taught information systems courses are the primary audience for this book, in particular final year undergraduate students and masters level students. Beyond this immediate audience we hope that the materials provided here may be of interest and use to a wider group, including those starting out on PhD or MPhil studies. There is an increased emphasis across all the social sciences on questions of research methodology, research training and the development of academic skills. Most institutions that offer substantial research degree programmes in information systems now provide some formal teaching both in general research methodology and in current research issues in the field. While this book does not claim to provide a comprehensive treatment of all the issues that such courses need to cover, it should provide an introduction to some of the substantive issues that are required to be considered.

The prime motivation for writing this book has been our experience in setting-up, supervising and marking student projects. We have also between us, done our share of projects as undergraduate students, postgraduate students and doctoral candidates, and we continue our careers as active researchers. In addition, we have both been external examiners for other universities at all these levels, and have viewed as outsiders the projects of hundreds of students on courses in information systems, business studies and computing. But perhaps the most influential experience for both of us has been our work in advising Masters students on the courses in Analysis, Design and Management of Information Systems (ADMIS) and Information Systems Development (ISD) at the London School of Economics. Over the past five years there have been over 400 students on these courses, and each of them has undertaken at least two projects, including a group project in term time, and a 10,000-word dissertation during the summer period. Each of those projects, almost without exception, has contained useful and insightful material, but most have also been flawed to some degree. We have often seen enthusiasm, good ideas and solid work come to little because of poor planning and a lack of awareness of what it takes to complete and present a project. In other words, we have not seen the perfect project or, if we have, we did not manage to recognize it.

What we have learned, however, is some of the essence of what it takes to produce a good project in the information systems field. In particular, we have

seen how the strengths and weaknesses of individual student's approaches to project work contributes to the final result. These experiences have convinced us of the need for students to be given guidance as to what it means to do research and what is expected of them in their project work. This needs to be backed up with a clear statement of the criteria against which their work will be assessed. There is also a need for students to be given some support and direction by their teachers during the early stages of project work.

This book cannot be expected to address these requirements completely; that is, it can neither set down a definitive statement of what is expected from projects in a particular institution, nor substitute for the involvement of an experienced and knowledgeable adviser. A book such as this can, however, provide valuable support in attaining these goals. If we have done our job well, it can provide a student with advice and information to help to make their own projects an academic success. Equally importantly, we hope that it can help to make the experience of undertaking a research project personally satisfying.

We also hope that the book can serve as a basis for encouraging teachers and lecturers to adopt a constructive approach to supervising student projects. Teachers in higher education are now under intense pressure; there are more students, more formalities to observe and more pressure to become involved in other aspects of academic life such as personal research, publishing and general administration. There is a danger that student projects may as a result be neglected or downgraded. Yet, it is our experience that a positive approach to projects, particularly in this young discipline of information systems, can be an intellectually and academically satisfying part of a teacher's work.

The pleasure that we have received in working with our own students, and the education that they have provided to us through their project work, leads us to dedicate this book to all our students in the Information Systems Department at LSE, past, present and future.

Tony Cornford

Steve Smithson

Department of Information Systems

London School of Economics and Political Science, 1996

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