

19<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Business Management

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### **Keynote Speech**

## **Enhancing Capacities for Scholarly Research with Special Reference to Formulation of the Research Problem and Question(s)**

### *Keynote Speech by W. Indralal De Silva*

Welcome to the PhD colloquium of the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce, University of Sri Jayawardenepura! Conducting a research is one of the most challenging, creative, and intellectually satisfying professional activity. In the research process, identification/formulation of an appropriate research problem is vital and many find it as a difficult task. If you have identified an appropriate problem for your research, you have accomplished the most challenging component in academic research - the problem is the central point of the research. By doing scholarly research, either new knowledge is created, or existing knowledge is challenged, amended or re-stated. However, Albert Einstein once stated, *“If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?”*

### **What is the Significance of Conducting Research?**

Research can help to increase the likelihood of success: Good judgment plus increased knowledge, increases the probability of correct decisions. However, in general, a few decision makers in our country utilize the existing research knowledge (findings/conclusion/recommendations etc.) in the decision-making process. Why? First, in an environment where research culture is poor or research findings are disseminated poorly, decision makers are not able to access or utilize research material for decision making process. Second, a decision maker with a deadline for a decision cannot wait for new scientific evidence or be too concerned about scientific scruples over demonstration of cause-and-effect.

Advanced research utilizes methodologies that can be replicated, produces results that are examinable by peers, including decision makers, and creates knowledge that can be applied to real-world situations. Scholarly researchers are likely to work as teams (multidisciplinary approach) to enhance our knowledge of how best to address the world’s problems ranging from environmental degradation, COVID-19 to economic crises.

### **Challenges in Conducting Scholarly Research**

Although universities in our country expect high quality research from post-graduates and the staff, very often they have to face the problem of lack of research skills and motivation for it. However, it is not your fault. Even in GCE (A/L) curriculum of state owned schools there is no provision to teach you “how to conduct a research”. In fact, most of you initiatives to learn about research it is at the latter part of your degree program. Thus, it is like you are expected to figure it out through trial and error in an environment where the research culture itself is poor. When you know how to do research, it’s much easier to improve your life and work. Instead of having to ask someone every time you have a question, research will help you solve problems yourself and help others in turn. Researchers go out into the field and design studies that give policymakers hard data on which they can base their decisions.

### **Steps Involve in the Research Process**

Research can make you overwhelmed, but it is more manageable when you break it down into steps. In my own experience, the research process has a number of key steps, which are fairly similar to the items incorporated into MPhil/PhD proposals. Those steps involved in the process of social research, i.e., (1) Identification/formulation of a **Research Problem**, (2) Selection of a **Topic** (3) Review of relevant **Literature**, (4) Development of **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework** (5) Formulation of research **Questions/Objectives/Hypotheses**, (6) Working out **Research Design/Methodology**, (7) Administering the tools of **Data Collection** and Others, (8) **Analyzing the Data** (9) Presenting and interpretation of **Results** (10) **Conclusion and policy implications** and (11) **Reporting the Research** (writing/presenting etc.). However, research guidelines provided by some academic institutions may deviate from the above.

### **Central Point of the Research: Identification of an Appropriate Problem**

The research process usually begins when a researcher selecting a broader research topic. Perhaps this can be identification of a research area. This usually includes generating ideas and identifying a problem. However, not all problems are ‘research-worthy’. In general, any question that you need answers, any assumption or assertion that you want to challenge or investigate can become a research problem.

As a PhD candidate you may feel that it is an easy task to formulate a problem, more precisely a “research problem.” Yet, it requires a considerable knowledge in both the subject area and research methodology. Once you examine a question more closely, you will soon realize the complexity of formulating an idea into a problem that is researchable. Several ways are available for generating ideas/questions and identifying a problem, but

usually problems are selected based on interest, urgency, usefulness, ability, uniqueness, or limitations.

A problem can be defined generally as one or more discrepancies such as a difficulty, obstacle, disagreement, inconsistency, dissatisfaction, or other abnormal characteristics permeating an existing situation. A research problem, though, is a vital issue containing one or more of these characteristics, which requires the application of scientific and often technical procedures, to find an answer or a solution, which will correct the discrepancies and alleviate the problem. Fisher et al. (1982) have put it more simply by identifying three conditions that lead to research. Namely, (1) **a perceived discrepancy between what is and what should be**, (2) **a question about why the discrepancy exists**, and (3) **at least two possible and plausible answers to the question**. This concept can be shown more clearly by looking at an example from nutritional status of children in Sri Lanka. Let us assume that nutritional status among children in villages of a particular district declines over the past three-year period. However, in one village the nutritional status increases over the same period. This leads to a discrepancy between existing and expected situations and the question “**why is this happening**” arises. Both qualitative and quantitative methods can be employed to identify possible reasons for this contradiction.

Social researchers truly do not do research on problems However problems are simply the general focus of the study, a starting point. To develop the research study, the researcher needs to refine and narrow down the problem into a research question. A common mistake of early career researchers is that they fail to narrow down a problem sufficiently, or they try to jump from a broad problem directly into a research without first deciding upon what research question(s) they are seeking answers.

The key difference between a research problem and a research question is that a **research problem** refers to an issue, difficulty, or gap in knowledge that is being addressed in research, whereas a **research question** refers to a statement that is in the form of a question. Moreover, research question examines, learns, and explores the research topic, where as a research problem focuses on the issues or the gaps that are analyzed and discussed under the research project. Furthermore, although a research question is formed based on the qualitative and quantitative forms, research problem is not formulated considering qualitative and quantitative categories. Besides, the research questions help to determine the methodology and hypothesis of the research, while a research problem cannot determine the methodology.

### **Sources of Research Problems**

Identifying a problem to study can be tough not because there is lack of issues that could be investigated, but due to the fact that formulating a socially relevant and researchable problem statement that is unique and does not simply duplicate the work of others is quite challenging. To facilitate how you might select a problem from which to build a research study, consider following three broad sources:

**Theory:** Utilizing a theory, the researcher can formulate a research problem or hypothesis stating the expected findings in certain empirical situations. The researcher asks the question: “What relationship between variables will be observed if theory aptly summarizes the state of affairs?” One can then design and carry out a systematic investigation to assess whether empirical data confirms or rejects the hypothesis and hence the theory.

**Interdisciplinary perspectives:** Identifying a problem that forms the basis for a research study can come from academic movements and scholarship originating in disciplines outside of your primary area of study. An interdisciplinary approach to selecting a research problem offers an opportunity to construct a more comprehensive understanding of a very complex issue than any single discipline might provide.

**Interviewing practitioners/key informants:** The identification of research problems about particular topics can arise from formal or informal discussions with practitioners/key informants who provide insight into new directions for future research and how to make research findings increasingly relevant to practice. Discussions with experts in the field, offers the chance to identify practical “real world” problems that may be understudied or ignored within academic circles.

**Personal Experience:** Your everyday experiences can give rise to worthwhile problems for investigation. Critically assess your own experiences and/or frustrations with an issue faced by the society, your community, or your neighborhood.

**Focus on literature:** A research problem can often be derived from an extensive and thorough review of pertinent literature associated with your overall area of interest. Also, authors frequently conclude their studies by noting implications for further research, this can also be a valuable source of finding problems to investigate.

**Now let me provide you a timely example from Sri Lanka: a research problem and question(s)**

**Problem definition:** According to Sri Lanka's labour force data for 2020, 65% of the male and 34% of the female population (age 15+) contribute to the Sri Lankan economy. Compared to women from the Western World,

Asian women may not contribute to their countries' economies due to a lack of flexible job opportunities, transportation, childcare issues etc. Since the pandemic, newly adopted virtual employment opportunities have supported many companies worldwide to keep their businesses alive and support their economies. Virtual employment can help countries like Sri Lanka to increase female employees' proportion in the labour force and contribute to economy productively. Along with the pandemic and economic recession, many companies and state organizations in the world are inclined to move to the virtual platforms and flexible working hours considering the current scenario. Virtual job platforms, especially for women, can be of great help in managing work-life balance and increasing the proportion of women in the workforce contributing to the Sri Lankan economy. However, in the Sri Lankan context virtual employment opportunities have not expanded compared to many countries in the developing world.

**Research Questions:** What kind of benefits can be obtained through virtual employment? What are the current virtual employment opportunities available for women? Why do women need virtual employment? What are the benefits of virtual employment for women and the employer? How can we achieve work and life balance when working virtually?

### **Inference**

A good problem statement begins by introducing the broad area in which your research is placed and then gradually leads the reader to narrower questions. In a nutshell **a research problem is** a statement about an area of concern, a condition to be improved, a difficulty to be eliminated, or a troubling question that exists in scholarly literature, in theory, or in practice that points to the need for meaningful understanding and deliberate investigation. In some social science disciplines, the research problem is typically posed in the form of **a question**. A research problem does not state how to do something, offer a vague or broad proposition, or present a value question. Also do not confuse a research problem with a research topic. A topic is something to read and obtain information about whereas a problem is something to solve or framed as a question that must be answered. For many PhD candidates research is an intimidating and overwhelming process. Another way to look at the prospect of conducting research is that it is your turn to explore into a new and interesting subject and present your own ideas about what it means. Undoubtedly, for successful completion of your research project you require to have strong commitment and motivation. By participating in this PhD colloquium your research capacities and commitments would get enhanced significantly. **Finally, it is inspiring to see that PhD candidates are enthusiastic and passionate about the quality of their research work and that their work contributes towards the enhancement of knowledge in their respective fields of study and at**

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**a large scale, towards the development of our country via incorporating research knowledge into scientific decision-making process.**

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