2 Identifying an Area of Research

PART A

The allocated research topic

You may not have a choice in what you research, it may be that you are given a particular topic area to research, or a concept to investigate. If this is the case, then if at all possible try to find some area that interests you within the given investigation. For example, let us say you are asked to research:

"Why unemployment is 35% higher among unqualified people in comparison with qualified people."

Try not to fall into the trap of immediately presuming that everyone knows the answer already. If you do this, you will not only fall into a biased research outlook, but you may feel that the answer is so obvious that you are wasting your time in researching the topic. This in turn will lead you to devalue the importance of your research and you will find it extremely difficult to motivate yourself, especially if problems occur.

News reports often interpret the facts about patterns in society in a biased or provocative manner, and no doubt you will, over a long period of time, have read or listened to many news reports relating to the unemployed which will have in some way coloured your opinions.

Your research could bring a new slant on readily accepted views. Ask yourself why this statement is perceived to be true; question whether it is in fact a completely unbiased statement; what age group is being considered; are male and female being equally considered; is the issue local and what factors might be affecting the statement. It could be that, in arriving at this assertion, no consideration had been given to a large percentage of 16–18-year-olds that were attending full-time education but not yet in full-time employment. They were of employment age and could have been used in the statistical analysis.

Also an older generation of people may have been included. A whole generation of teenagers, who attended secondary modern school in the 1950s and 60s, left school aged 15 or 16, having never been given the oppor-
tunity of taking a single examination. This generation is now approaching retirement, perhaps they no longer wish to be employed, or they may be among the target redundancy age group that finds it difficult to find work. Your research could lead you to discover that the problem is not one of qualification but of age.

Questions such as these can be the start of turning an assigned topic that at first impression seems boring into one that holds immense interest. If you are going to spend a considerable amount of your time involved in research, it is important to feel motivated and interested in the topic from the outset.

**Choosing your own research topic**

Selecting a topic to research needs careful consideration. If you have a choice, it is wise to think of several topics that might interest you and do some groundwork before settling on the final one. Don’t jump straight in and adopt your first idea. Write down a list of issues that you would find interesting to explore within the remit of your research area. If your research has to be in the area of health, your initial list might include:

- screening provision
- preventative medicine
- men and cancer
- waiting list issues
- the GP system in the UK
- homes for the elderly and infirm

Think carefully about each proposed topic. *What* is the current state of affairs? *What* questions are raised? *What* factors are important? Asking the question *why* is also very helpful at this stage and prompts you into thinking along lines that you might otherwise have missed. For example, if we take the last topic on the list, ‘homes for the elderly and infirm’, your *what* questioning leads you into the area of what is the difference in options available for those who need nursing help as opposed to those who are elderly and need some help but not that of a qualified nurse. If you then ask the supplementary question *why*, you are very likely to find yourself with other areas of possible considerations, such as financial restraints, government provisions or the needs of the individual.

Questions such as these will prompt you into beginning the research process, but it is only a starting point. You need to narrow and refine your research area into a manageable size; you only have limited time to conduct