

Business management: Subject-specific guidance

See also: EE generic guide and EE Teacher support material

Overview

An extended essay (EE) in business management gives students an opportunity to carry out in-depth research in an area of personal interest relating to business management.

The EE gives students an opportunity to develop research skills by:

- reviewing business theories, concepts and principles
- critically analysing their use and application in the business world and their resultant impact on business activity.

The EE requires the application of business management theories, tools and techniques to produce a coherent and structured analytical essay that effectively addresses the research question.

Choice of topic

Students can choose a topic they have encountered during their Diploma Programme business management course. However, they may also choose to investigate issues that fall outside its scope. For example:

- business practices in a specific regional or national context, or
- the practical applications of the work of a particular business management theorist.

Whatever area they choose, students must root their research firmly in accepted business management theories and use the core principles of business management as the basis for their research.

Students are strongly advised to choose a topic that enables them to carry out research and apply business management theories and techniques in a real-world setting. This setting may be an organization, industry or market in a particular region or country, or globally.

Sources of ideas may include:

- an interest in issues raised in the classroom
- aspects of a student's own experience
- current events.

Research questions that do not allow a systematic and meaningful investigation using business management theories, concepts and principles are unlikely to be suitable.

Backward versus forward-looking questions

Students can choose to investigate past event(s). However, they must ensure that their question will enable them to analyse and evaluate rather than simply describe what happened.

A forward-looking question can enable students to search for conflicting sources to arrive at a well-supported argument and conclusion. But the topic should not be so forward-looking that information and results are not yet available: hypothetical questions based on future events are to be avoided.

Examples of topics

These examples are for guidance only. Students must ensure that their choice of topic is focused (left-hand column) rather than broad (right-hand column).

✓	✗
Focused topics	Broad topics
Application of lean production principles to the NGO ABC	Relevance of lean production for NGOs
Relevance of ethical objectives for very small and very large companies in Canada	The link between ethical objectives and organizational size
Use of Herzberg's motivation theory in productivity improvement at XYZ Ltd	Motivational techniques at XYZ Ltd
The contribution of Just-in-Time production in improving efficiency in the textile industry in Cambodia	Effectiveness of Just-in-Time production techniques

Treatment of the topic

Sources

Students' research should be broad and detailed, using a range of sources. Excessive reliance on a single source, such as a company's annual report, is unlikely to give students sufficient scope or breadth in their analysis.

Students can include materials sourced from a particular business or organization whose area of business is related to the topic chosen, eg market research companies, industry analysts or think tanks.

Secondary sources

Students should use secondary data as the basis of their EE, supported where appropriate by primary research. The sole use of secondary sources is permitted and will allow students access to all levels of the EE assessment criteria.

(Note that this is **similar** to the research approach of the SL internal assessment task of the business management course and **different** to the research approach of the HL internal assessment task, where primary research takes precedence.)

A good range of secondary sources should be consulted, including:

- business management textbooks
- general business management books
- industry analyses
- company reports and data.

Primary research

Students must plan any primary research well so that it yields genuinely additional and significant insights.

Students and supervisors are required to:

- act with tact and sensitivity towards the research subjects
- respect the confidentiality of the organization(s) and people involved.

All the research carried out must address the research question. Similarly, the development of the essay must be related to the research question directly and consistently and must not include information that is unnecessary.

Use of analytical tools and numerical data

A good essay will demonstrate the appropriate use of analytical tools, often supported by numerical data to assist the discussion and evaluation.

Appropriate analytical tools from the business management syllabus include:

- Ansoff Matrix
- BCG Matrix
- Break-even analysis
- Decision tree
- Financial statements and ratio analysis
- Fishbone diagram
- Force field analysis
- Position maps
- Stakeholders analysis
- STEEPLE analysis
- SWOT analysis

Students may also use analytical tools that are not included in the syllabus.

Conceptual perspectives

Strategic and conceptual perspectives on the research question can add to the interest and rigour of the essay, for example:

- the effect of new technologies on organizational innovation
- the cultural and ethical implications of business decisions.

Analysing the data

Use of theory

Students should integrate relevant business management theories, tools and techniques with the evidence obtained by the research throughout the essay.

Students should not present theory as a separate section. An essay that delivers theory as a separate section of the essay and does not apply it to the specific research question is unlikely to succeed.

Students should avoid making assertions using business management theories and techniques if they cannot meaningfully link these to their case study with supporting evidence.

Critical thinking

Students must ask probing questions and look at all relevant factors when considering the information obtained from their research. Information cannot always be accepted at face value.

A critical approach, in which students display the skills of analysis and evaluation, is essential.

Students should indicate unresolved questions, or new questions that have arisen from their study, in their conclusions.

Students should remember that a business management essay must be written in an objective style without personal bias. Conclusions should be derived from the evidence and not based on any preconceptions of the student.

Examples of topics, research questions and suggested approaches

Once students have identified their topic and written their research question, they can decide how to research their answer. They may find it helpful to write a statement outlining their broad approach. These examples are for guidance only.

Topic	An evaluation of the introduction of total quality management in ABC Ltd
Research question	To what extent has the introduction of total quality management (TQM) improved quality at ABC Ltd?
Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A literature review of how quality management techniques have changed with the introduction of TQM, both generally and specifically in the industry of ABC Ltd. • Selection of relevant indicators measuring quality and collection of the corresponding data for ABC Ltd. • Analysis and evaluation of the ways in which ABC Ltd has adapted its approach to managing quality, and the impact of this on the selected indicators.

Topic	An evaluation of the case for strengthening social responsibility practices at multinational XYZ
Research question	Should multinational XYZ strengthen its corporate social responsibility practices in the aftermath of scandal X?
Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A review of how various local and international media reported on the reasons for and events around scandal X at multinational XYZ.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of the social responsibility practices at multinational XYZ preceding scandal X, with a particular emphasis on practices and indicators relevant to scandal X. • Application of SWOT analysis to these practices. • Identification of potential ways of strengthening social responsibility practices from industry leaders. • Application of SWOT analysis to these practices. • Evaluation, from different stakeholder groups' perspectives, on whether multinational XYZ should strengthen its social responsibility practices in suggested ways or leave them as is.
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Topic	Measuring the success of joint ventures: a comparative case study
Research question	How successful has the joint venture between ABC Ltd and XYZ Ltd been as a growth strategy for both companies?
Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A literature review of the theoretical benefits and drawbacks of joint ventures. • A review on the reporting around the joint venture at the time it happened: what were the reasons given by the companies for the joint venture and how did industry analysts assess the case? • An examination of the financial results of ABC Ltd and XYZ Ltd prior to and after the joint venture, and comparison of these results with industry benchmarks. • Analysis and evaluation of the qualitative and longer term benefits and drawbacks of the joint venture since the joint venture, in comparison with benchmarks in the industry.

An important note on “double-dipping”

Students must ensure that their EE does not duplicate any other work they are submitting for the Diploma Programme. In particular, the EE must not be an extension of the internal assessment task. Students must ensure that they understand the differences between the two.

- The HLIA task—a research project—must be based on primary research (eg interviews or questionnaires), whereas the EE must be based on secondary research (eg academic journal articles or specialized publications).
- The HLIA task is a practical and highly structured piece of investigation leading to practical proposals for action for company management, whereas the EE is a scholarly piece of investigation that does not result in the formulation of recommendations.
- The SLIA task—a written commentary—must be based on secondary research, like the EE, but for the SLIA task, only three to five supporting documents are required, whereas for the EE, there is an expectation of attempting a more academic, broader and in-depth investigation.

Supervisors play an important role here in guiding students on these distinctions. Students risk their diploma if academic misconduct is found.

Interpreting the EE assessment criteria

Criterion A: Focus and method

(Strands: Topic, Research question, Methodology)

The EE title promotes the application of the higher order skills of analysis, evaluation and synthesis, rather than encouraging a descriptive essay.

The research question must be specific and sharply focused on a business problem or issue worthy of investigation. It should require the use of business management theories, tools and techniques. Topics that consider generic or broad issues will restrict the possibility of effective treatment within the word limit and will constrain performance on this criterion.

Students must use **secondary resources** in the first instance. Students should employ high-level academic research and writing skills, and show that the student is capable of intellectual discovery and creativity .

The essay should be based on a comprehensive review of the literature on the topic selected. It **must not** end up as a practical investigation resembling a higher level internal assessment.

Any essay based heavily on questionnaires and/or interviews will inevitably lose marks on a range of criteria.

If primary research is conducted it must provide information that is not accessible from secondary sources or that significantly enhances the value of the secondary data presented.

All research conducted, whether primary or secondary, should support specific quantitative and qualitative analysis and evaluation directly related to the research question.

Students must demonstrate that their essay has been well planned and that they have designed an appropriate and coherent approach and structure to address the research question.

Criterion B: Knowledge and understanding

(Strands: Context, Subject-specific terminology and concepts)

The student should use the sources to place their topic into a wider business context.

For example, if the focus of the essay is on the role of social media, the student should be able to explain the impact the social media has on a number of business functions, such as marketing and recruitment.

The student must demonstrate that they have a good grasp of business terminology and that they can use this fluently, accurately and consistently when developing lines of argument. They may need to clarify terms or provide further explanation or definition of selected terms or concepts.

Criterion C: Critical thinking

(Strands: Research, Analysis and Discussion and evaluation)

The sources collected by the student should be relevant to the research question and applied appropriately, so that an argument can be formed and a conclusion(s) reached.

Throughout the essay, the student is expected to present and analyse business data and sources and to evaluate the insights and significance of these for addressing the research question. To score highly against this criterion, the student needs to demonstrate a sophisticated application of analytical and evaluative skills.

An integrated use of research and business theories, tools and techniques is required to develop an argument and to assess the strengths and limitations of various perspectives on the topic under investigation. Essays that are wholly or largely descriptive in nature will score poorly against this criterion.

The student should develop a reasoned, coherent and logical argument in response to the research question. Where appropriate, conclusions to points should be made throughout, and there must be at least one culminating conclusion that summarizes the student's response to the research question. Any judgments made should be consistent with the argument presented and supported by evidence.

The student should comment on the quality, balance and quantity of the sources and reflect on any bias or limitations that may weaken the strength or affect the objectivity of supporting materials.

The student should point out any limitations or unresolved issues in the research and suggest further action to address these.

Criterion D: Presentation

(Strands: Structure, Layout)

This criterion relates to the extent to which the essay conforms to accepted academic standards in relation to how research papers should be presented. It also relates to how well these elements support the reading, understanding and evaluation of the essay.

Students may provide a section and subsection structure to their essays, with appropriate informative headings. Subheadings should not distract from the overall structure of the essay or argument presented.

Any graphs, charts, images or tables from literature sources included in essays must be carefully selected and labelled. They should only be used if they are directly relevant to the research question, contribute towards the understanding of the argument and are of a good graphic quality. Large tables of raw data collected by the student are best included in an appendix, where they should be carefully labelled.

Too many graphs, charts and tables detract from the overall quality of the communication. Only processed data that is central to the argument of the essay should be included in the body of the essay, as close as possible to its first reference. Any tables should enhance a written explanation and should not themselves include significant bodies of text; if this is the case then these words will be included in the word count.

Students must take care in their use of appendices as examiners are not required to read them. All information with direct relevance to the analysis, discussion and evaluation of the essay must be contained in the main body of the essay.

Any material that is not original must be carefully acknowledged, with specific attention paid to the acknowledgment and referencing of quotes and ideas. This acknowledgment and referencing is applicable to audiovisual material, text, graphs and data published in print and electronic sources. If the referencing does not meet the minimum standard as indicated in the guide (name of author, date of publication, title of source and page numbers, as applicable), and is not consistently applied, work will be considered as a case of possible academic misconduct.

A bibliography is essential and has to be presented in a standard format. Title page, table of contents, page numbers, etc must contribute to the quality of presentation.

The essay must not exceed 4,000 words of narrative. Graphs, figures, calculations and diagrams are not included in the word count. Students should be aware that examiners will not read beyond the 4,000 word limit, nor assess any material presented thereafter.

Criterion E: Engagement

(Strands: Process, Research focus)

This criterion assesses the student's engagement with their research focus and the research process. It will be applied by the examiner at the end of the assessment of the essay, and is based solely on the candidate's reflections as detailed on the [RPPF](#), with the supervisory comments and extended essay itself as context.

Students are expected to provide reflections on the decision-making and planning process undertaken in completing the essay. Students must demonstrate how they arrived at a topic as well as the methods and approach used. This criterion assesses the extent to which a student has evidenced the rationale for decisions made throughout the planning process and the skills and understandings developed.

For example, students may reflect on:

- the approach and strategies chosen, and their relative success
- the [Approaches to learning](#) skills they have acquired and how they have developed as a learner
- how their conceptual understandings have developed or changed as a result of their research
- challenges faced in their research and how they overcame these
- questions that emerged as a result of their research
- what they would do differently if they were to undertake the research again.

Effective reflection highlights the journey the student has engaged in through the EE process. In order to demonstrate that engagement, students must show evidence of critical and reflective thinking that goes beyond simply describing the procedures that have been followed. Reflections must provide the examiner with an insight into **student** thinking, creativity and originality within the research process. The **student** voice must be clearly present and demonstrate the learning that has taken place.