Innovative Methodologies in Qualitative Research: Social Media Window for Accessing Organisational Elites for interviews

Efrider Maramwidze-Merrison
Sheffield Business School, Sheffield Hallam University, South Yorkshire, UK
Tel: +447515594941
efridermaramwidze@yahoo.com

Abstract: Reflexivity is the nature of qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Morgan an Smircich, 1980); implying that through reflectivity exercises researchers are able to demonstrate their research's rigour and also create a treasure trove of ideas and strategies, share the pleasures and agonies of doing qualitative research. The ever-growing body of knowledge on the strategies for accessing research participants that researchers share, evidences the gains of reflexivity (see the newly injected literature Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016; Blix and Wettergren, 2015; Mikecz, 2012). Well, this article does the same; it reflects on the access methodology employed for a PhD research (Maramwidze, 2015) carried out to explore the challenges faced by Foreign Direct Investors (FDI) in the South African banking sector, which involved sampling elite respondents. Similar to other researchers' views on accessing potential research participants, in this case organisational elites, the researcher faced challenges associated with gaining access; as well as the usually high cost of conducting face-to-face qualitative interviews.
Whilst qualitative research provides contextually rich data related to specified research objectives, it is agreeable that this depends on the seniority and level of experience of respondents in organisations of interest. Organisational elites are good examples of such experienced respondents, but they are difficult to access because they often use gatekeepers to screen down possible contacts and manage their workloads more effectively. This access problem is particularly exacerbated on the part of beginning researchers who have not built up a deep enough networks of organisational contacts, which typified this author.

The paper promotes the online social and professional media window access strategy for overcoming the challenges of access; which of course, helps minimise the financial and time cost factors. The key insight from the paper is that, success in accessing professional elites requires a methodical approach to identifying and building relationships (for types of researcher - respondent relationships, see Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016) with suitable online professional groups and staff in target organisations for the research, from early on in the research process. This establishes needed trust and elicits stronger cooperation from such elites in providing meaningful information to the researcher. The purpose of this article is therefore to present the author's subtle and innovative access strategy. As such, the paper does not attempt to provide details about data collection, analysis or findings of the case study reflected upon. The main contribution of the paper to knowledge is the immediacy in experience which the PhD study affords beginning researchers in learning how to establish such online relationships of trust with the elite participants, learn and implement innovative methodologies, to access and interview elites than would be the case without such strategies. The wider implications of the ideas for teaching research methods to beginning researchers are therefore explored later on in the paper.

Keywords: Reflexivity in qualitative research; organisational elites; innovative and diplomatic access strategies; social media (LinkedIn); research students; teaching research methods

1 Introduction

Successful completion and quality of a research, especially qualitative research, typically requires experienced organisational respondents suitable for answering the research questions meaningfully (Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016; Mikecz, 2012; King, 1994; Robson, 2002). Hornby et al (1993, p. 280 cited in Welch et al, 2002) states that elites are groups of individuals in societies who are considered to be superior because of their position of power, authority, talent and privileges, hence the influence that they may exert on others (Woods, 1998). These elites are often difficult to access because of the need to alleviate time pressures around their commitments. Given the need for rich qualitative data which organisational elites provide and interest in managing down the overall costs of doing qualitative research, it is important to explore practical tips for achieving these objectives to beginning researchers, such as research students. Articles on gaining access, building relationship and trust, and maintaining relationships for example, are bountiful. It is however, the need to continue adding to this body of knowledge, reflexive discussions of the strategies for gaining access, especially using case-study experiences, for updating purposes. The ever-evolving technological innovations mean ever-evolving methodologies which researchers can adopt. When such innovations are used successfully, it makes sense to update knowledge on such developments in order to help other researchers; hence the gains of reflexivity in qualitative research. In this paper, a particularly useful set of strategies takes

Reference this paper as: Maramwidze-Merrison E "Innovative Methodologies in Qualitative Research: Social Media Window for Accessing Organisational Elites for interviews" *The Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods Volume 14 Issue 2 2016 (pp157-167)* available online at www.ejbrm.com

advantage of social media and professional networks as a window for accessing organisational research participants. This approach and strategy is currently not as main-stream as traditional research methods in literature.

The purpose of this paper is to promote the social and professional media as access window for organisational elites. It uses a PhD research entitled: '*The political challenges of foreign direct investments: insights from South African banking sector'* completed in 2015 at Sheffield Hallam University, UK, to demonstrate the successful use of online social and professional media (LinkedIn particularly) to recruit organisational elites for a qualitative research. The organisational elites involved are therefore experienced bank staff, investors in the banking sector, and policy makers whose perceptions of the said challenges were needed. Reflecting on this journey is important especially to beginning researchers because it opens new windows for accessing the difficult to access organisational elites. The author faced access challenges while doing the PhD research; finding it difficult to connect and obtain interview appointments because of various hurdles. Generally, her experiences are immediate to such beginners, whose problem of access is exacerbated by lack of established network with such elites compared to mature industry-based researchers. Also, there was a real need to manage down the overall cost of the PhD research which was self-funded, a position facing most research students. Because of the purpose of the paper, the author makes no attempt to bring in details of data, analysis or findings.

1.1 Overview of the article

The rest of the article is as follows. Section 2 is a brief literature review on access to organisational elites in qualitative research, which reiterates the gaps in knowledge. Section 3 presents pertinent aspects of the PhD case study contextualises the research experience shared with the readers, and elucidate wider research methods thinking which research students can benefit from. The thrust of the case study is how the researcher overcomes the challenges in gaining access to needed organisational elites in the study. A discussion section (4) summarises the contributions to knowledge of the paper whilst Section 5 presents a case for inclusion of this topic into teaching research methods to research students; suggesting the effective use innovative research approaches to gaining access to elite participants. Section 6 concludes the paper, offering suggestions for future insights.

2 Literature review on access to organisational elites in qualitative research

The main foci of this literature review are access to elites and the process of interviewing them. This strand of literature falls under the widely agreed assertion that gaining access to research participants is an arduous task. For instance, latest works Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016; Mikecz, 2012; Harvey, 2010 agrees with earlier assertions (Laurila, 1997; Welch et. al, 2002; Leblanc and Schwartz, 2007) that accessing respondents and indeed organisational elites for the purpose of interviewing them for qualitative data, is difficult. Some writers argue that the implication of this difficulty is that researchers may shy away from interviewing organisational elites because of the perceived barriers (Delaney, 2007). This denies the research access to rich experiences, which make the elites particularly important as sources of research data. As evidenced in the following section, a sizeable body of literature provide insights to researchers on strategies for accessing organisational elites. That said, the strategies rely mainly on the researcher having a network link to the elites which most early researchers such as research students may not have.

2.1 Who are organisational elites?

Several writers offer seemingly assenting descriptions for elites in general. For example, Mills (1999) cited in Blix and Wettergren (2015) brackets elites as those people who have power and authority, prestige and money, and are often in control and command of things. In organisation research, organisational elites are the people who occupy senior positions in organisations (Welch et. al 2002; Woods, 1998 cited in Harvey, 2010; Hornby et. al 1983 cited in Welch et al 2002; and Giddens 1972). In this context, the organisational elites dealt with can be characterised as political, economic and corporate elites, since they include senior bank staff, investors in the South African banking sector, and government policy makers. Most of them occupy senior positions, are powerful in terms of strategic decision making roles, and have great influence on the behaviours and actions of others in the organisations and/or society. The sample comprised of company owners, chief executive officers, managing directors, and senior persons in public and private organisations.

2.2 But why is it difficulty to access organisational elites?

Literature suggests that most elites tend to erect barriers around themselves (Hertz and Imber, 1993; Welch et al, 2002; Mikecz, 2012) which makes the sampling processes time-consuming and difficulty (Thomas, 1993). So, how do elites shut out the world? Suggestions in literature points at persons known as gatekeepers; whose responsibility is to screen and approve who sees who and when. So no matter the category of elites under research, gatekeepers are thought to be the hurdle between. Examples of gatekeepers include persons such as secretaries or personal assistants (Drew, 2014; Ostrander, 1995; Laurila, 1997; Welch, 2002; Leblanc and Schwartz, 2007; Mikecz, 2012). This is limiting for researchers because they often have to work on strict time boundaries with limited funding. Generally, literature suggests various strategies for identifying, contacting and gaining commitment to participate in research, which typically, is the sampling stage of a research. Sampling, according to Robson (2002) is critical for the research's rigour and quality. Sampling involves the careful selection of research participants from a research population (Walliman, 2005) and according to Mason (1996) a sample should consist of people possessing appropriate knowledge for answering the research questions.

2.3 The process of gaining access

Clearly, the process of gaining access to elites depends entirely on the category of the elites being pursued. With regards to organisational elites, Brannick and Coghlan, 2007) suggests that primary access is when the researcher seeks for permission to get in to an organisation for the purpose of undertaking research and secondary access is the process of building relationships in order to gain access to people and information. To access research participants, Goldman and Swayze (2012) summarises the stages of gaining access in a brief but quite comprehensible manner, namely: a) identifying potential participants; b) contacting and c) gaining commitment stages. Through these stages, some recent articles suggest first-step strategies such as reviewing organisational databases and business listings in order to gain insights into organisations then decide who to include in samples, and use of business directories to identify potential elites (Dexter, 2006; Odendahl and Shaw, 2002; and Welch et al., 2002).

The second stage involves mainly contacting the organisation or individual elites in order to inform them of the research purpose. Thus, the research uses existing contacts in target organisations seeking their consent to participating in research. However, advice shared here focus on one's own contacts in organisations which early researchers may not have, and also mature researchers who are not familiar with the industry of focus in a study. For instance, Welch et al (2002) suggests some interesting ideas that are quite helpful in formulating approaches to organisational elites. They suggest the use of an internal sponsor for example, a senior person in an organisation, who would use his/her power and authority to influence the participation of others. The question that remains unanswered is: what if the researcher has no internal sponsor or the research involves a number of organisations? Ostrander (1993) believes the approach is practicable if the sponsor one knows has influence and is also known by many others. However, this approach, which they call the cascading or top-down approach, has some drawbacks, if a (novice) researcher has not yet established any strong network of influential contacts in the field of research. As Macdonald and Hellgren (1998) posit, Welch et al (2002)s' suggestions may work well but may not reduce the cost challenge in qualitative research. Overall however, just like Mason (1996), Welch et al. (2002) assume that the snowballing technique can come in handy for building up research samples, but only when the researcher has gained initial access into the organisation.

The final stage of access to elites involves communicating with the chosen individuals. Researchers commonly share the advice that strong letters of introduction to state the research purpose is paramount (Delaney, 2007). However, at this stage, communication barriers erected to screen who speaks to elites can impede contact efforts. Elites often employ gatekeepers as noted earlier, who screen visitors and communication with elites in order to lighten their loads in organisations. Advice presented in literature entails communicating the value that the person will add to the research, thus making the person see the big picture and stressing the fact that their input is significant for the successful completion of the project (Delaney, 2007; Sabot, 1999; Dexter, 2006).

2.4 But how is the challenge of gatekeepers addressed in literature

Extant and current literature distinctively contribute unique strategies that researchers have successfully employed, and believe can help gain access to research participants. Most however, do not point at the social and professional media as windows for accessing organisational respondents, even elites. To mention but just a few, Harvey (2010 p9) exhibits quite a number methods for gaining access; Mikecz (2012) shares his experiences on gaining access to the Eustonian community of elites. His positionality, which Petkov and Kaoullas (2015) describes as the researcher's knowledge of aspects of culture, social, or physically knowing the organisational elites, was advantageous to gaining access. But the concept of positionality is also thought to be a hindering factor in accessing organisational elites (see Petkov and Kaoullas, 2015 for elaborated types of positionality). Mikecz explicitly shows that he made a break through because he had worked at an international university and had trained corporate executives, therefore had a portfolio of the potential people from which to build the research sample (social capital to put it in the words of Thuesen, 2011 cited in Mikecz, 2012 p 486). This suggests that inside knowledge of an organisation and an established fluid relationship with organisational elites prior to the research ensures perhaps, the successful elimination of gatekeepers. Formal "dating" of potential participants with a purpose to develop and nurture relationship for research seems to be an agreeable approach in literature. Cunliffe and Alcadipani (2016) conceptualises such an approach into three main perspectives of relationships for accessing difficulty to access respondents (see Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016: p 541 for the nature of access from the Instrumental, Transactional and Relational perspective). Petkov and Kaoullas (2015) adopt the use of an intermediary to gain access to a preferred respondent. According to these writers, an intermediary would be anyone with close contacts with a target respondent; from friends, relative, doctors or lawyers. They admit that this approach is "highly contextual" (p 7) which may suggest longer processes and delays, thereby incurring more costs. Similarly, Cunliffe and Alcadipani (2016) approaches entail both 1) relational and perhaps 2) opportunistic or random access. Relational in that, because of the outsider positionality, an intermediary (acquaintant) was used in order to gain access to a target respondent. Opportunistic or randomly because the researcher approached anyone believed to be of influence in the organisation. What is evident in most of the cases reviewed is that; strategies employed involve physical contacting of target respondents, depended on already established relationship or on the use of physical intermediaries. It could be thought that in this time and age, it could also be useful to peep and try to tactfully gain access through the social and professional media window, avoiding the hurdles of 1) positionality 2) gatekeepers.

2.5 Gaps in knowledge

As a major gap in knowledge in this area, once more, the question that remains unexplained is how researchers without internal contacts, for instance, can go around the gatekeepers' challenge. This paper addresses this question by sharing the author's recent experiences in accessing professional elites for her research in the hope that it will benefit research students significantly, a perspective that is not fully covered by other researchers who narrate their own experiences (Richards, 1996; Welch et. Al., 2002; Morris, 2009; Delaney, 2007; Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016; Petkov and Kaoullas, 2015; Blix and Wettergren, 2014; Mikecz, 2012; Easterby- Smith and Malina, 1999; and Nudzor, 2013).

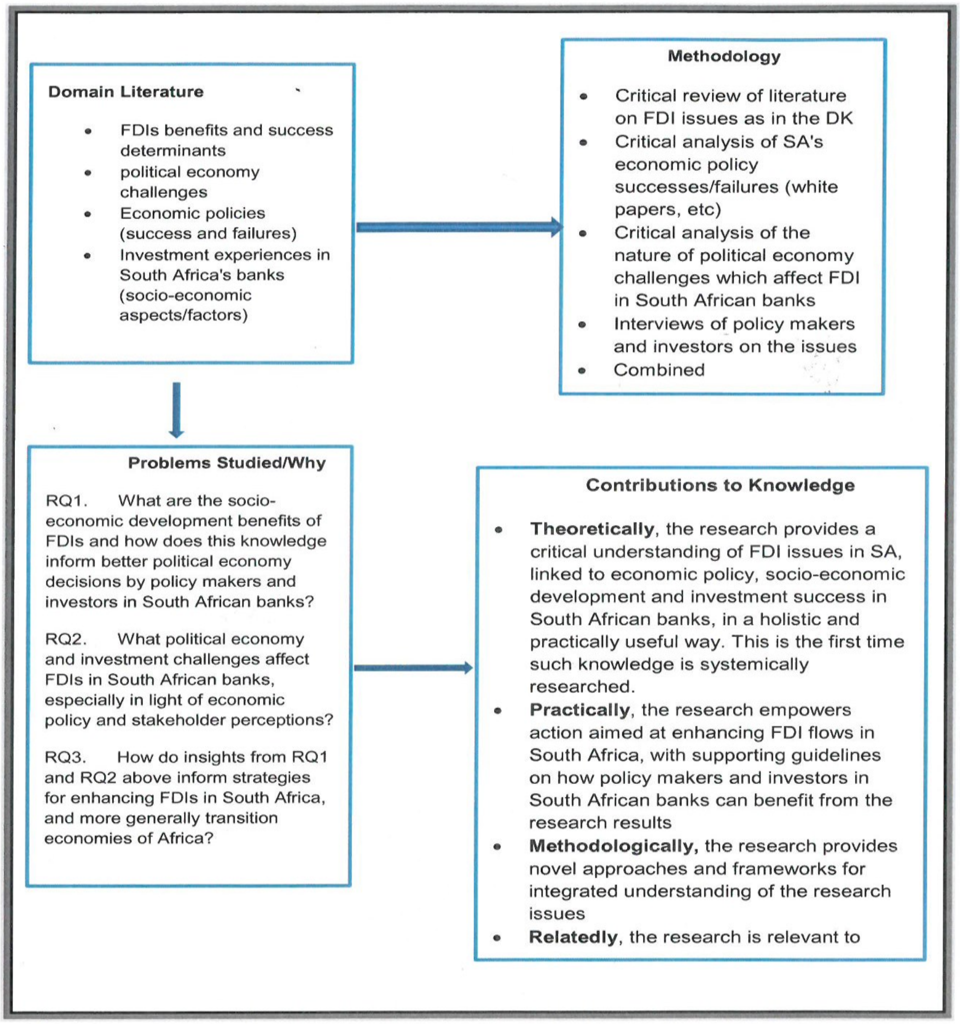
3 Methodology

Since the purpose of this article is to present the author's subtle and innovative access strategy, the author makes no attempt to provide details about data collection, analysis or findings of the case study reflected upon. The main contribution of the paper to knowledge is the immediacy in experience which the PhD study affords beginning researchers in learning how to establish such online relationships of trust with the elite participants, learn and implement innovative methodologies, to access and interview elites than would be the case without such strategies. Also recommended and elucidated are the wider implications of the ideas for teaching research methods to beginning researchers are therefore explored later on in the paper.

3.1 The PhD research: Empirical insights from South African banking sector

However, providing some insights into the stem research is fundamental to facilitate the conceptualisation of the methodology and access technique adopted. As noted earlier, this article stems from a PhD research carried out to explore the political challenges facing investors in the South African banking sector and the impact of FDI flows on the economy as related to their experience. It explored the experiences and perceptions of local and foreign investors, the government and the intermediaries about FDI flows into the economy. This lands the research into qualitative tradition using interview and required it to use semi-structured interview technique to obtain their in-depth views. Also, the nature of the research topic and objectives compelled the research to conduct in-depth, face-to-face interviews with organisational elites. To set the context of the research pictorially, the researcher presents below the research objectives, methodology, and contributions to knowledge of the research.

Table 1: Research framework for the study



Author (2014) following Ezepue (2016, p. 28)

The table shows four important boxes under which most research topics are conceptualised, namely: Critical Literature (Domain Literature), which teases out researchable gaps in knowledge; Problem Studied and Why, which determines which gaps to explore further and frames them into guiding research questions; Methodology, which consists of a suitable approach for successfully exploring the questions; and expected Contributions to Knowledge, which portray the value-adding outcomes from the research. In this research, it is clear from the research questions that key evidence required from the research is the qualitative experiences of stakeholders in the research – bank staff, investors in banking, and government policy makers, for example. As noted earlier, senior staff amongst these stakeholders constitutes the organisational elites that are the subject of this paper.

3.2 The Pertinent aspects that elucidate key research methods and procedures

As highlighted earlier, Brannick and Coghlan, 2007) suggests that primary access is when the researcher seeks for permission to get in to an organisation for the purpose of undertaking research and secondary access is the process of building relationships in order to gain access to people and information. Taking on from this viewpoint, the researcher approached the access process from a relational perspective (Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016) endeavouring to build a fluid relationship with target elites, where access is sought by directly contacting the identified research elites. Details of the access process are reflected on below.

3.3 The reflexive journal

As the author is a research method tutor and enthusiast, it was reasonable to reflect on the challenges of gaining access to organisational elites, and to offer a systematic approach that eased the process of accessing and successfully interviewing target respondents.

As mentioned earlier, reflexivity is the nature of qualitative research in assessing quality (Mays and Pope, 2000) for example, and for satisfying many other conventions; developing a reflexive journal was part of the reflexive methodology the author adopted to contribute to the theories of accessing organisational elites. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) in a reflexive journal, a researcher notes down regular entries of the research process and procedures/techniques employed at different phases of the research process for credibility reasons and these entries can be used as rich sources of methodological approaches in literature. It is in these entries that the researcher recorded methodological decisions and the reasons for their choice for quality and rigor purposes. The same approach is now employed to import and contribute to the body of literature, innovative techniques used to access organisational elites that were difficult to access before the methodology was designed and employed.

4 Overcoming the challenges in gaining access to organisational elites

4.1 Avoiding the gatekeepers

Just like other researchers, the author asserts that the main challenge the research on exploring the challenges facing foreign bankers in South Africa was sampling the appropriate respondents; who happen to be organisational elites, typically surrounded by gatekeepers. The access process was characterised by several failed attempts; typically, no response or failure to speak to the targeted research participants due to barriers between. The following procedures were then tried and tested, resulting in a successful recruitment of relevant target elites in the various organisations that were sampled for the purpose of the study.

4.2 Identifying potential organisations and interview subjects using internet research techniques

In order to identify potential organisations to include in the study, convenient sampling technique was utilised. Convenient sampling entails identifying potential respondents who have the knowledge required in a study and can be accessed more cheaply and timely than randomly sampled respondents (Suri, 2011; Morse, 2010; Neuman, 2004; Cohen et al, 2004; Marshall, 1996). Thus initially focusing on the research questions, the researcher searched for information on key players in the banking sector of South Africa, by surfing the internet and listing down potential organisations. Research supporting the use of social media to mine data from online discussions, to recruit participants and to facilitate research networks is ubiquitous Benson et al., (2014). Internet searches were fast and free, and can be conducted from anywhere where there is internet connection. The Reserve Bank of South Africa's website provided vital information about the FDIs, for instance, web addresses, physical addresses, telephone numbers and even names of the senior officers in the key informants' organisations. The researcher continued using web-searches to handpick organisations and individuals with characteristics suitable for answering the research questions, then started making contacts through professional networks such as Twitter and LinkedIn.

4.3 Contacting and gaining commitment

After identifying the research respondents, the next task was to get personal contact details of the relevant people. The internet and professional network approach the researcher adopted required tact and diplomacy in order to gain access to organisations and to elicit senior persons' commitment to a scholarly research successfully. At first, this was not easy because of the unfamiliarity between the researcher and the potential participants. Carnegie (1951)’s teachings on how to win people were found useful. He wrote that if you want people to be genuinely interested in yourself, you need first to become genuinely interested in them. He advised that one can only gain access to somebody and be in their good favour, if one learns about them and their interests. The process is reciprocal, those people will think well of you in return. People need to feel that their importance is acknowledged and appreciated and one can disarm people by showing them that their importance is appreciated, that way, they will not have to make a point of proving to you that they are important because they already know that you think they’re important. Carnegie (1951) suggestions implied that, people's defences will be lowered and they will be much more likely to help you. This is the teaching that helped establish and maintain a rich network of potential participants remotely.

Social network tools such as LinkedIn and Facebook were used to identify and initiate a professional relationship in this study. The sites are quite rich and informative in terms of the organisations and individuals profiles and can be used to mine personal and professional data for research (Vladlena and Stephanie, 2013). The researcher was able to identify and select suitable persons from the profiles on LinkedIn. From there, she made direct communication to a person holding a position of interest using email on LinkedIn messaging. Of all these internet communication media, LinkedIn professional networking site was the most effective and efficient because of the number of responses compared to other Media. The researcher was able to connect with significant research subjects and had access to view their connections, most of which would be linked to other significant subjects for the study. The beauty of social and professional Medias is that they all provide free access to information as long as one has internet connection.

Once connections were established, the researcher introduced the persons to the research by sending information packs that included an introductory letter, an information sheet that clearly stated the purpose of the research, a consent form listing their rights, ethical issues, as well as contact details of this researcher and the University supervisory team. Communicating the research purpose is commended by many researchers who have tackled elite interviews. Interview subjects were all furnished with information about the research, thus, its purpose, the interview structures and the intended outcome. Besides helping answer the question "what is in this research for us?" it is believed that this approach will make individuals visualise the long term benefits of the research (Welch et al, 2002; Delaney, 2007). The researcher inspired the subjects by informing them of the potential changes that the research may instigate in as far as FDI policies are concerned. For example, the researcher emphasized that their participation might give them, for the first time, a platform from which to air their views about the advantages or disadvantages of the investment climate in which they are operating. As for the politicians and policy makers, motivation to participate was none other than the knowledge that they are doing something good, something highly appreciated in their policies which researchers have identified and would like to spread their good deeds through research.

In most cases people contacted were the rightful persons but whenever the person felt he or she was not the right person, they would mention the name of the person they knew was the appropriate respondent, resembling the progressive snowballing sampling technique the study employed. The snowball sampling technique was handy and proved to be an effective way of recruiting respondents whenever additional lines of enquiry were sought from other participants with who trust was already built. LinkedIn provides quite a useful platform for the snowball technique for continual recruitment of more participants as and when necessary. It should be mentioned that it is not always or automatic that very senior and important people respond and connect with a stranger on LinkedIn. But LinkedIn helped mitigate this challenge. For example, the researcher would ask for permission from already connected networks to act as referees to potential connections, an approach similar to Welch et al (2002) cascading approach. Also, it appears as if once some senior and important persons agree to connect, their presence in the researcher's network attracted other senior and important persons.

In retrospect, it is important to maintain a long lasting relationship with potential participants once the relationship is established. After accessing and having most of the research respondents within her communication network, the researcher built and nurtured friendly but professional relationship by continuously communicating with them on a regular basis through social networks such as Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. For example, the researcher 'followed' them on these social networks, commenting on their postings or writing on their virtual walls, which implements Carnegie (1951)'s suggestion appropriately in the research. Taking interest in the career and even personal interest of identified participants was a strategy that helped this researcher to gain their attention and in turn, interest in what she was also doing. As a matter of fact, some of them started following the researcher on the same networks, a positive indication that they were interested in the relationship. Being followed or connected with some of the powerful individuals strengthened the researcher's position in terms of gaining trust, and facilitated further recruitment of more potential participants. By so doing, the researcher and the participants became familiar with each other. Familiarisation before the actual interviews was helpful because it helped to reduce tension during interviews, which is common when strangers meet. The rapport with the study participants was built on trust, respect and honest agendas of the study, which were communicated to the respondents from the outset.

4.4 Summary of strategies used in dealing with challenges of access to the studied elites

Having pre-explored literature on accessing and interviewing elites, the researcher was aware of the likely challenges associated with elites, in particular gatekeepers. In the view of this major stumbling block, some invaluable strategies to accessing potential interviewees are highlighted in literature. For example the researcher's own contacts and networks, and the importance of trust building are highlighted. Mikecz (2012), for example, highlights the problem of gatekeepers in contacting elites and the subsequent costs because of the hurdles researchers encounter and suggests using networks and social capital for instance, in order to gain access to elites. However, although some researchers have attempted to provide practical knowledge on building networks for example (Mikecz, 2012) conversations on how researchers initiate or develop those important and trustworthy relationships and how to nurture them are remain limited and the strategies are dated.

4.5 The Relational Perspective approach

Taking on the process from a relational perspective (Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016) the challenge of gatekeepers was mitigated by first, a deliberate desktop research; a cost effective approach that is mostly free, quick and easy, facilitated by internet. Researchers can get access to potential respondents' data, contact them directly and get quick responses. Depending on individual tact and skills, personal charm in communication and relationship building research samples can be achieved at the convenience of the research using minimal resources. In most cases, and for as long as the professional profile of the target individual is online, the gatekeepers challenge is eliminated. Cutting off the middle links reduces significantly the time and cost challenge.

The significance of writing and sending strong introduction letters stating the purpose of the research as advised by Goldman and Swayze (2012) for example cannot be underplayed, but this was done after establishing relationship rather than as letters soliciting for connections or networks. The researcher sent out information packs comprising of a) introduction letter detailing the purpose of the study, expected contributions of the interviewee, b) interview guide listing topics for discussion, and 3) consent form highlighting interviewee's rights to access interview data before and after the research if they wish.

5 Summary of contributions to knowledge

The paper demonstrates the tips for cultivating trust among potential organisational elites in qualitative research. It addresses the need to support early-stage researchers with an immediate experience they can relate to. It fills a gap in this area which is due to lack of deep networks of research students with these elites, which is also important to mature researchers without such a network. The paper developed ideas related to challenges around gaining access organisational elites in qualitative research by providing a contextually-informed set of practical tips for overcoming those challenges. It detailed the thought processes, research framework which serves as a thinking frame and strategies for side-stepping gatekeepers to such elites in the research process. This way, researchers are able to build trust with potential elites via online professional media (LinkedIn, Facebook for example), which helps researchers to effectively, conveniently, timely, and cost-savingly secure rich qualitative data from the elites relevant to successful exploration of stated research questions. These affordances are particularly helpful to beginning researchers like research students, a focus that has not been adequately covered in the literature. The immediacy of such new researchers learning these success tips from one of their own (as the author is having just completed her PhD research in 2015) will make the ideas easier to grasp by such new researchers.

It may not be right to say that there is a pronounced conceptual framework which underpins this research, since the paper dealt with a limited facet of the PhD research topic, which used suitable conceptual frameworks in the FDI field. That said, interpreting the term ‘conceptual framework’ broadly to mean accepted ideas in the literature which inform the thesis point of the paper (challenges of access to organisational elites in qualitative research), the paper explicated received ideas in the literature on strategies for overcoming the challenges. At least, it exemplifies such strategies using a recent doctoral research as a case in point, and in light of how they are facilitated by modern internet research techniques, as explained above. A subtle and stand-out framework for enhancing access to organisational elites lies beneath the steps discussed in the paper for enabling researchers to gain access, namely: eliciting suitable lists of elites; approaching them using their profiles in professional networks; refining the list down to a core pool of experience elites using snow-balling by colleague referrals; relating with the ethnographically within the professional networks in order to build trust with them; finally sensitizing them about the research topic, what they can contribute to it, and what it means for them, and for the ‘world’.

Methodologically, the paper surfaces such methodological novelties as: a) the said use of modern internet research techniques to overcome access to studied elites, b) use of an emotionally immediate recent case study to convey the strategies to new researchers who suffer the disadvantages of access, cost and time pressures more than mature researchers; c) a combination of the internet techniques and face-to-face interviews in order to triangulate and deepen the evidence base for the research; and d) inclusion of elements of research thinking and implementation that provide wider training in research methods to new and mature researchers (Flick, 2009). An example of these additional elements is the eight criteria in the ladder of criticality which the author uses here, following Ezepue (2015).

The researcher appreciates the need for novel research as implied in this criterion, and notes that the novelty of this paper consists mainly in a) an explication of how to use internet research techniques to overcome challenges of access to organisational elites in a way that is directly focused on the needs of early researchers, and b) a development of wider skills in advanced research thinking which benefits all researchers, for example, the use of a simple research framework to clarify key points in the research process. The theoretical puzzle resolved by the paper is the subtle issue of 'access to needed research subjects in the internet age' (a sense of next generation research techniques), which alleviates not only access problems, but also cost and research time pressures. The practical puzzle is how to use a mini-doctoral research story as a case study in teaching these skills to new researchers who typically have neither the networks that facilitate easier access to organisational elites, nor the resources to prosecute more expensive traditional research approaches.

The researcher feels that the paper, albeit modestly, energises an increasing focus on modern internet-based research techniques, using professional networks, as first-line strategies in research thinking across almost all topic areas, in social sciences, humanities, business and management, for example. This is because of the substantial cost advantages, time saving affordances, ease of access, and wider ethnographic scope which these techniques facilitate compared to traditional approaches such as face-to-face questionnaires, and visit to organisations.

6 Integrating innovative methodologies training into curricula

Pedagogically, the publication of the paper in the proceedings of the 15th European Conference on Research Methodology for Business and Management Studies ECRM 2016 was the first step in the dissemination of the PhD research methodology to which the paper relates. The researcher uses the ideas to design curricula for inclusion of such topics into the teaching of research methods to university students. For example a blackboard training portfolio packed with Future Research Education on Application and Practice (FREAP) for developing students' research knowledge and practical research skills deriving from tried and tested methodological innovations, through approaches such as:

- Research training initiatives

  Block release classes or periodic research training masterclasses dedicated to formally train students at variant levels in preparation for their level dissertations/research including field work phases.

- Research conversations lounge

  Designing learning slots which allows for informal conversations with invited guest speakers and tutors with variant research experiences (qualitative/quantitative) sharing knowledge and practical research tips; and students encouraged to ask questions about different stages of research, for example practical tips on accessing participants.

- Research methods consultations

  Dedicated and personalised research surgeries where students get 30-60 minutes time slots to come in and ask/discuss selected research methods topics with member of teaching staff. Personalised discussion with students on the practicalities of conducting field work. Members of staff can provide field work guidance based on experience and practice based research.

- Blackboard wikis and discussion boards

Discussion boards and wikis dedicated to provide platforms from which students can discuss, with the opportunity to share knowledge and experiences, with each other and with members of the research methods teaching team.

7 Conclusion and recommendations

This article drew on a PhD study (Maramwidze, 2015) to present the author's experiences on recruiting organisational elites from the South African banking sector, in an endeavour to continue adding knowledge on how to access organisational elites. It offered insights into how some barriers to gaining access to elites can be overcome, specifically practical tips on strategies for identifying and recruiting potential informants, scheduling and preparing for the interview, establishing, building and nurturing rapports.

The paper particularly highlights the use the advantages of using internet research techniques in qualitative research compared to other traditional approaches, and the need to combine approaches, where necessary. It emphasized the scope of these contributions for enhancing the teaching of research methods such as mainstreams the needs of early researchers.

7.1 Limitations

It should be noted that this article is context- and topic-specific. Therefore, the lessons and ideas offered are based on experiences interacting with organisational elites in a FDI context, and not philanthropic elites for example. Whilst some procedures may be applicable across elites, some may be adjusted depending on the suitable categories of the elites.

7.2 Suggestions for further research in view of all these?

The paper has developed additional perspectives for the 'theory development' in the wider area of modern online research techniques, mainly in form of a suggestion that researchers consider the feasibility of these techniques first, before and/or other techniques, depending on the nature of research questions involved. It is important to do this for all kinds of qualitative and other research topics. In terms of research practice, this remark holds, and further consideration should be given to how the kinds of methodological novelties achieved in the paper could be applied to further work in the area, and research methods generally. Areas to look at include mixed-methods research, quantitative research, and policy-leaning applied research, which call for differing emphasis in the techniques explored in the paper. An area of practice that is germane to all research fields is the teaching of research methods, which the paper has foregrounded as discussed in the foregoing criteria. The mainstreaming of the needs of early researchers in these quests is worthy of further attention by researchers.

Acknowledgement

This article draws on PhD (Maramwidze-Merrison, 2015). The author wishes to acknowledge with gratitude, Dr Andrew Johnston and Dr Pawel Capik for supervising the research to its successful completion, anonymous reviewers from the 15th European Conference on Research Methodology for Business and Management Studies, Kingston University, UK, and Patrick Oseloka Ezepue for helpful suggestions for improvement.

References

Asiedu, E. (2002) On the determinants of foreign direct investment to developing countries: is Africa different?. *World development*, *30*(1), pp.107-119.

Benson, V., Morgan, S. and Filippaios, F. (2014) Social career management: Social media and employability skills gap. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *30*, pp.519-525.

Bergman Blix, S., & Wettergren, Å. (2015). The emotional labour of gaining and maintaining access to the field. *Qualitative Research*, *15*(6), 688-704.

Blix, S. B., & Wettergren, Å. (2015). The emotional labour of gaining and maintaining access to the field. *Qualitative Research*, *15*(6), 688-704.

Brannick, T., & Coghlan, D. (2007). In defense of being "native": The case for insider academic research. *Organizational research methods*, *10*(1), 59-74.

Carnegie, Dale. (1951) *How to stop worrying and start living.* Numitor Comun Publishing.

Cunliffe, A. L., & Alcadipani, R. (2016). The Politics of Access in Fieldwork Immersion, Backstage Dramas, and Deception. *Organizational Research Methods*, 1094428116639134.

Delaney, K.J. (2007) Methodological dilemmas and opportunities in interviewing organizational elites. *Sociology Compass*, *1*(1), pp.208-221.

Dexter, L.A. (2006) *Elite and specialized interviewing*. ECPR Press.

Drew, H. (2014) Overcoming barriers: Qualitative interviews with German elites. *The Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, *12*(2), pp.77-86.

Duke, N.K. (2004) The case for informational text. *Educational Leadership*, *61*(6), pp.40-45.

Easterby-Smith, M. and Malina, D. (1999) Cross-cultural collaborative research: Toward reflexivity. *Academy of Management Journal*, *42*(1), pp.76-86.

Ezepue, P. O. (2015, 2016) Grasping the Basics and Stylistics of Effective Literature Reviews and Academic Writing. Research Report of the African Higher Education and Research Observatory, UK: AFRR | GLOTRES | 2015 | 01, www.afrihero.org.uk, updated 10 January, 2016.

Figenschou, T. U. (2010) Young, female, Western researcher vs. senior, male, Al Jazeera officials: critical reflections on accessing and interviewing media elites in authoritarian societies. *Media, Culture & Society*, *32*(6), 961-978.

Flick, U. (2009) *An introduction to qualitative research*. Sage.

Giddens, A., (1972) Elites in the British class structure. *The Sociological Review*, *20*(3), pp.345-372.

Goldman, E. F., & Swayze, S. (2012) In-depth interviewing with healthcare corporate elites: Strategies for entry and engagement. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *11*(3), 230-243.

Harvey, W. S. (2010). Methodological approaches for interviewing elites. *Geography Compass*, *4*(3), 193-205.

Hertz, R. and Imber, J.B. (1993) Fieldwork in elite settings Introduction. *Journal of contemporary ethnography*, *22*(1), pp.3-6.

Laurila, J. (1997) Promoting research access and informant rapport in corporate settings: Notes from research on a crisis company. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, *13*(4), pp.407-418.

Leblanc, R. and Schwartz, M.S. (2007) The black box of board process: Gaining access to a difficult subject. *Corporate Governance: An International Review*, *15*(5), pp.843-851.

Lincoln, YS. & Guba, EG. (1985). Naturalistic Inquiry. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Macdonald, S. and Hellgren, B. (1998) The interview in management research. *Iconoclastic Papers*, *1*(2).

Maramwidze, E. (2015) The political challenges of foreign direct investments: insights from South African banking sector (Unpublished Doctoral dissertation). Sheffield Business School, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK. .

Marshall, M.N. (1996) Sampling for qualitative research. *Family practice*, *13*(6), pp.522-526.

Mason, J. (2002) *Qualitative researching*. Sage.

Mikecz, R. (2012) Interviewing elites addressing methodological issues. *Qualitative inquiry*, *18*(6), pp.482-493.

Morgan, G., & Smircich, L. (1980). The case for qualitative research. *Academy of management review*, *5*(4), 491-500.

Morris, Z. (2009). The truth about interviewing elites. Politics, 29, 209-217.

Morse, J.M. (2010) Sampling in grounded theory. *The Sage handbook of grounded theory*, pp.229-244.

Nudzor, H. P. (2013) Interviewing Ghanaian Educational Elites: Strategies for Access, Commitment, and Engagement. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *12*, 606-623.

Odendahl, T., & Shaw, A. M. (2002) Interviewing elites. *Handbook of Interview Research. Context & Method. Thousand Oaks–London–New Delhi: Sage*, 299-316.

Ostrander, S. A. (1993) 'Surely You're Not in This Just to Be Helpful: Access, Rapport and Interviews in Three Studies of Elites.' *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* **22**: 7–27.

Petkov, M. P., & Kaoullas, L. G. (2015). Overcoming respondent resistance at elite interviews using an intermediary. *Qualitative Research*, 1468794115589646.

Putnam, R. (1976) *The Comparative Study of Political Elites*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Richards, D. (1996) Elite interviewing: Approaches and pitfalls. *Politics*, *16*(3), pp.199-204.

Sabot, E.C. (1999) Dr Jekyl, Mr H (i) de: the contrasting face of elites at interview. *Geoforum*, *30*(4), pp.329-335.

Suri, H. (2011) Purposeful sampling in qualitative research synthesis. *Qualitative Research Journal*, *11*(2), pp.63-75.

Thomas, R. (1993) 'Interviewing Important People in Big Companies.' *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* **22**: 80–96.

Walliman, N. (2005) Your research project (2nd ed.). London, United Kingdom: Sage.

Walford, G. (1994) *Choice and equity in education*. Continuum Intl Pub Group.

Welch, C., Marschan-Piekkari, R., Penttinen, H., & Tahvanainen, M. (2002). Corporate elites as informants in qualitative international usiness research. *International Business Review*, *11*(5), 611-628.

Woods, M., (1998) Rethinking elites: networks, space, and local politics. *Environment and planning A*, *30*(12), 2101-2119.