

## Methodological Unity Within College Students Final Thesis: When Choosing A Case Study Strategy

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**Abstract.** The paper presents one of the most unique and, on the other hand – most frequently used – social research strategies – a case study. Analysing the randomly picked 25 final works, written by Vilnius Business College students, back in 2013, some features of methodological unity are discussed and also compared within these final thesis. Case study research was mainly developed and based in the areas of economy, law and business. Even though there is no deeper analysis neither on how students interpret the case study research strategy nor why they would chose such a way of exploring business environment, however, some of those peculiarities could be drawn and highlighted. Besides, some of the findings are seen as the possible future surveys and main streams of even assuring study quality at the College. Also findings have revealed the fact that in most of business and management program final projects students were choosing a case study approach while surveying separate company's contexts, though in some aspects a broader contextualization was missing.

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### Introduction

Research methods have become a central part of the social sciences. They constitute an important part of their curricula and provide the means through which their intellectual development is enhanced. Indeed, their status as “sciences” is often justified by alluding to the technical aspects of research methods, while the very term “science” carries out the ideas in areas of study which are accessible only to those who have undergone a lengthy training process in order to understand their inner workings. At the same time, there are also students of different disciplines who might characterize themselves as “theorists” rather than “researchers”. The latter concentrate on the process of research, while the former might argue that they gain an advantage in having a distance from the empirical world in order to reflect upon the processes and products.

There are many types of educational research studies and there are also a number of ways in which they may be classified. Studies may be classified according to the topics whereby the particular phenomena being investigated are used to group the studies [1,2]. Thus, among various types of researches in social science, especially in business and management studies, such as historical, descriptive, correlation,

causal, experimental, ethnographic, and research development, a case study research plays a rather controversial role – on the one hand, this kind of research usually is taken by the many as one of the most convenient research designs as anything fits within it [2]; on the other hand – this type of research may be seen as quite unique with its logical sequence, procedure hierarchy, and finally as a separate research strategy within social sciences, i.e. among quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods design [3,4].

Despite the advantages and strengths that may be obvious and quite clear at first, when choosing case study approach in business real-life contexts, there are few limitations for such type of research, here two may be cited: the first would be convenience, and the second, that case study could be identified as an unscientific methodological set because of limited generalizability [2]. Also students might pick this strategy as a kind of solution to make a research as easy as possible, especially in the frames of sampling (i.e. case study approach in most aspects does not require statistically approved samples or using strict set of instruments). Thus, it is rather important to show both sides of case study research design, especially for students – one might say that all types of research include case, but not every case could be seen as a case study

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research. Contextualization is one of the main features and also this peculiarity is a strong characteristic within a case study approach [4].

Therefore the main focus of this paper is placed on frequency of choosing a case study research design in Vilnius Business College students final thesis in 2013, where the great emphasis is put on business and management issues.

The aim of this work is to present, analyse and describe a case study research methodology and to show the reader the frequency of choosing such strategy by Vilnius Business College students.

Content analysis was provided in final works/projects by 25 students. However, one of the main weaknesses of this paper and a drawback is the absence of deeper and thorough analysis on how students interpret case study strategy in their final thesis and what are the major factors influencing such an option for their projects. Therefore, this might serve as a streamline for the further observations, comparisons and a conduct of much more qualitative survey on the College students' academic ability.

## 1. Case study strategy implementation

It is worth to mention that the guidelines of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) imply the rethinking of many of the current evaluation systems, since the new pedagogical models are now focused on the learning acquired through the students' personal work and on the establishment of the ideal conditions for them to achieve the learning outcomes of the proposed educational objectives [5]. As the authors would state further, the rapidly expanding knowledge base and the changing demands of work and employment mean that it is desirable that these abilities are generalized: the new era of Higher Education requires the establishment of a comprehensive quality assurance system at every European educational institution.

As part of this new system, universities, colleges along with their offered study programmes must demonstrate that their graduates have achieved a set of learning outcomes established in each discipline area [5]. Regarding this, it has been a standard practice during the last years for social sciences programmes to incorporate at least one major assessment exercise in the final year of the studies in the form of a project that is viewed as the culminating learning experience of the undergraduate programme, and the quality of student output is often used as an indicator of the quality of the programmes as a whole (ib id).

Having said that, while conducting the final project/thesis, students have to learn how to implement different research strategies in their academic approach to the explored phenomena. Thus, students show their ability and skills to analyze the real-life contexts and settings using the gained knowledge when studied.

Therefore, one of the most comprehensive research on case

studies was that conducted and updated by Yin [3]. According to this author, case studies can also be considered as a research strategy adopted to investigate a phenomenon in its real-life context. Moreover, they can be designed as single or multiple case studies. A single case study can be designed when it represents a unique or rare circumstance and can serve a revelatory. Therefore, we even may witness today that many young researchers (students) and scientists would rather choose a single case study approach in their final thesis and in many cases without any thorough consideration on what a real case study strategy means. Moreover, the single case study must be significant: it should be 'unusual' and of general public interest; it should entail issues which are nationally important in terms of theory or practice. When a study contains more than one single case, it is normally labelled as a multiple-case study. Such study can be used for establishing comparisons between the units under investigation. It can also require "extensive resources and time beyond the means of a single student or independent research investigator" [3, p. 47].

As one of the means of constructing reliability and validity, Yin stated that a good case study will employ multiple sources of evidence to collect data, followed by data analysis [3]. When we conduct a case study, we are relying on analytical generalization rather than on statistical one, which normally happens in a survey study. By statistical generalization, it is meant that one has in mind a specific population and subsequently, a sample, which is considered for gathering empirical data. It depends on quantitative formulas which may be applicable to populations and samples, which is by far the most common way to adopted if one is doing a survey study or analysing data from archives. On the other hand, analytical generalization is to be understood as the form of conducting a new experiment. In this sense, the investigator chooses a topic and searches a theory, which had been previously developed but can be further used as "a template with which to compare the empirical results of the case study" [3, p. 32-33]. Yin argued that the "analogy to samples and universes is incorrect" [3, p. 37], as case studies do not represent a sample. Cases are not "sampling units and should not be chosen for this reason" [3, p. 32]. So, a researcher "should try to aim toward analytic generalization in doing case studies" while avoiding "thinking in such confusing terms as *the samples of cases* or the *small sample size of cases*" [3, p. 33]. The reason for this is that every case is unique and as such cannot be replicated, however, if similar or analogous cases are conducted, the same theoretical constructs may be used to analyse the data, bringing out similar results.

## 2. Identification of main phases

Identification of main phases in final thesis was provided using stable strategy by means of holding the plan and methodological unity.

Mateo, Escofet et al. after analysing both European Higher Education Area strategic documents, some of the leading European Universities' academic practices (e.g. University of Limerick, Free University of Berlin etc.) and other EU legal acts that regulate study programs, have created a guide for the design and preparation of the final thesis, which concretizes the fundamental activities that are necessary to be done during each phase [5].

Having in mind all those regulations, stated in HEI's and EU's documents, the phases within final thesis at Vilnius Business College are of same sequence as well [5] as presented below.

*Phase 1: Topic selection.* During this phase, the students have to choose the research topic they want to develop. The topic selection will also determine the tutor who will supervise and also student has to prepare a report justifying the selected topic.

*Phase 2: Planning.* During this phase, the student has to create a work plan including: the title; the research context; the research objectives; the methodology and the sources that will be used for the data collection; the resources that will be used for the research; a more complete literature review about the topic.

*Phase 3: Development.* Students have to study in depth the topic's literature and build up the theoretical framework of the project by taking into consideration the literature review and the most discussed references during the study years of the undergraduate program. In addition, they have to carry out the field research, by analyzing the results obtained through the data collection instruments, extracting conclusions and determining future prospective for the project. Finally, this first draft should be delivered to the tutor and it should be revised and corrected according to his/her guidelines.

*Phase 4: Final delivery and presentation.* During this stage students have to deliver the final and corrected version of the final thesis/project and prepare its public presentation and to defend in front of the evaluation committee. The overall goal is the public presentation and defense of the study. During the defense, the committee explores, with the candidate, the research methods employed in conducting the study, the findings and conclusions of the study, and the contributions to the study are expected to be offered in the decision making processes. In this way, the candidate and examiners reach more extensive insight into the candidate's research area.

Summing up, we may state that, according to Ref. [5], the learning processes in the undergraduate curricula involve both the acquisition of discipline-specific knowledge and the development and reinforcement of professional skills. As the matter of fact, it is not possible to create an instrument fitting all possibilities of the final thesis and this is one of the

reasons why the authors of this paper have decided to focus mainly on choosing the strategy and developing the research. We all know that the final thesis constitutes one of the main means for the development of the cognitive and instrumental competences of the undergraduate students, helping the students to learn to carry out the design and development of an empirical work, and to consolidate their acquired knowledge, abilities and attitudes [5, 3].

### 3. Case study strategy in students final papers

Taking into account all those phases within students' final works (Vilnius Business College case) that have to be fulfilled and the main purpose of making the final thesis – developing both cognitive and instrumental skills/abilities, we have explored randomly chosen 25 final papers prepared and defended publically by Vilnius Business College students back to 2013. The works were selected based on the criteria of evaluation (only works that were evaluated no less than 8 and up to 10 were picked), study program (only Business Management and Marketing), and study form (both full-time and part-time students works were analysed). Using the qualitative content analysis [6, 1, 2] of chosen works and picking only strategic approaches that were indicated in the beginning (introduction part) of final thesis and matching all of this with paper titles, we have generalized all those 25 works into a matrix indicating the main topics and correlating them with the scientific problem (if existed) and chosen research strategy, i.e. case study (see Table 1).

The analysis of students' final thesis at Vilnius Business College shows that the majority of topics are closely related with the strategy of case study as the problematic field mainly concentrates around a particular company issues and business contexts. This is in most cases methodologically correct and happens often in contemporary researches of business, management and economy fields.

However, we may state some features that are missing within those works, especially having in mind a case study strategic methodology, when the contextualization of different aspects within explored case is highly recommended [3-4, 6-7]. Also in many cases students avoid deeper and much thorough analysis of chosen problematic area – they are rather broad. This fact is stressed in many other research works concerning strategy and methodology issues [1-3]. The same could be said about the topicality field as well, when presenting a case with less details on practical aspects of the work and lack of specification. All these remain as the common flaws in social research methodology as the case study strategy by many novice researchers is mainly understood as the way of doing research without any rules, when quantitative and qualitative survey considerations get mixed and thus a case study approach becomes rather convenient way of getting done with the final thesis.

Table 1. Topics, scientific problem and chosen strategy in students' final thesis

Research area (topics) within final thesis	Scientific problem and chosen research strategy
The management of human resources	Organizational success through gained profit (a case study analysis)
Choosing the strategy of marketing and its realization	Organization profit is mainly linked with the right marketing strategy (a case study analysis)
The factors of stress at work	The problem is linked with social and financial losses in the company (a case study analysis)
Trademarks and their marketing	The concurrency among higher education institutions and the positioning of Vilnius Business College (a case study analysis)
The customer satisfaction with the quality of services	How to measure students' satisfaction with study quality at Vilnius Business College (a case study analysis)
Organizing the conferences	Sales and organization of e-conferences (a case study analysis)
Introducing a new product into the market	How to introduce canoes' rent service in Lithuanian market (one company's case)
Relation management with the clients	Possibilities of CRM and its implementation (a case study analysis)

## Conclusions

A case study is frequently employed as a research strategy in most of students' final thesis. Validity within case study is mainly supported by several sources of data collection and analysis, based on different theoretical perspectives. Reliability will be obtained through data analysis, which is carried out by analytical generalization – a theory is searched and used for comparing the empirical results.

Findings have shown that the majority of topics, defended publically in 2013, are closely related with the strategy of case study as the problematic field mainly concentrates

around a particular company issues and business contexts.

Also some flaws of using the case study approach might be drawn within students' final thesis: less of contextualization, the research object remains unspecified and the topics need to more detailed, expanded with putting much of emphasis towards tight relations to chosen research strategy. This could be seen as the perspective directions for further considerations both to tutors and students when strengthening research methodology and broadening the understanding of case study analysis as an independent research methodology rather than just a narrow analysis of a specific company's issue.

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