Practical advice on how to design your research project

What do we mean by a research design for a project? In any proposal for a project or in the writing up of research there should always be a section that sets out in detail the overarching design for the research. Typically, the research design will describe the purpose of the study and the kinds of questions being addressed, the techniques to be used for data collection (for example, experimental designs, surveys, case studies, etc.), approaches to sampling and how the data are going to be analysed. The research design may also wish to say something about whether inductive or deductive methods are going to be adopted and whether the overall approach is going to use quantitative or qualitative methods and why. If adopting a mixed methods design, it is important to make it clear why – in other words, what is it about this combination of quantitative and qualitative methods that strengthens the design? Here, you might want to explain how the quantitative and qualitative methods assist each other. For example, one aspect of the research design might involve the triangulation of methods so that, say, qualitative interviews are used to corroborate or verify the quantitative data gathered through an online survey.

One aspect of research design that is often neglected is how the quality of the data are going to be addressed. For example, particularly in quantitative studies, researchers will want to report on how issues of validity and reliability of data were handled in the project. In qualitative studies, these themes might again feature, although qualitative researchers might be more interested in features such as the authenticity of the data and its potential transferability.

Remember, whatever research design you use, it often helps the reader if you not only describe your overarching design but also include a flow diagram that illustrates it. Constructing such a diagram often helps your own thoughts, getting you to reflect on the design and to make adjustments as necessary.