

## **Student experience podcast transcript: Emma Taylor**

**Could you tell us about your research project? We are particularly interested to hear about the research design and the research methods that you chose.**

As an integral part of the Research Methods for Political Scientists course at Strathclyde, I designed a research project which aimed to investigate what effects the laws on drinking had in shaping people's behaviour and attitudes towards drinking and investigate the level of popular support for the Licensing Act. I commenced my project shortly after the new licensing laws came into effect on 1<sup>st</sup> of September 2009 and took a quantitative approach by developing a structured survey. I used a convenience sample which was composed from 60 individuals who were asked to fill out a self-completion questionnaire. I applied a correlation research method, as the aim of the surveillance was to establish whether there was a sustained link between our independent variables (including gender, age and education) and our dependent variable (support for the new licensing laws). The findings suggest that, in general, attitudes towards drinking since the implementation of the Licensing Act have not changed, and, moreover, that respondents generally stated the licensing laws would be "somewhat effective."

**What sparked your interest in the subject you chose to research?**

Following the changes implemented by the Scottish Government regarding the Licensing Act, it became evident that these changes (namely the "72-hour" law, and the "10 to 10" law) may affect the general public's attitudes towards drinking. In a nation where binge drinking is increasingly becoming a problem, an integral part of combating such issues is through legislation. Therefore, could recent changes be supported? And would they alter perceptions of drinking? Scotland's government should look at studies made in Scotland in order to understand how effective their policies are, and how they can be improved.

**Did you need to secure access to an organization in order to do your research and, if so, how did you go about this?**

Our group submitted the pilot survey to be approved by the Department of Government's Ethics Committee (DEC) prior to the interviews. To avoid causing offence with any potentially sensitive questions, we included an "intersex" option for our gender variable and "houseperson" under occupation variable.

**Could you tell us how you came up with those questions?**

I looked to what the intentions of the Scottish Government were for creating these new licensing laws—ultimately to crack down on binge drinking in Scotland. More specifically, the "10 to 10" law is argued to sustain controlled drinking within a time barrier. However, one could argue that because alcohol is still available in pubs and clubs until 4am, that a very limited amount of the population are affected by this restriction. In addition, the "72-hour" law may take time to be fully implemented, since public houses and nightclubs can't afford to keep alcohol prices low for 72 as opposed to 24 hours in the long run. Therefore, I wanted to investigate the initial public opinions of the laws and their effectiveness.

Consequently, research into where alcohol consumption was restricted in other Western nations highlighted the changes in attitude and behaviour towards drinking as a result of these restrictions. As a consequence, my study also aimed to identify whether the general public's opinion towards alcohol had changed as a result of these new licensing laws.

### **How did you go about the literature review? Can you run us through the steps you took?**

As the changes to the drinking laws had been so recent, there were no current surveys that had been carried out in this line of research. Therefore, my project endeavoured to demonstrate the initial public opinion of the laws, and allow for further research to be carried out.

Previous literature on this topic has taken many forms, as there have been many studies carried out which focus on changes to drinking legislation throughout the world. McLaughlin and Harrison-Stewart investigate the effect of a temporary period of increased alcohol availability. The second study we used, Osterberg, looked directly at the effects of control measures on alcohol consumption in Finland, and aimed to find out whether or not control measures themselves made a difference. In a more recent study, Norstrom and Skog investigated the effect of opening alcohol outlets on Saturdays in Sweden and measure the response to alcohol sales.

The literature I came across to help with my survey seemed to suggest that any change in policy that attempts to control alcohol consumption may be met with apathy from its citizens.

As there were no significantly similar studies involving the UK, we had instead to focus on other Westernized nations with a similar culture (such as Australia) as well as more European-based cultures such as Finland and Sweden. Had we used examples from non-Westernized nations, the review may have been less accurate and not directly related to the current study, which would lead to a false hypothesis.

### **What prompted you to choose this research design and method?**

In order to address our research questions, the group adopted a quantitative approach which involved interviews with the general public. In terms of methodology, we made the decision to use correlation research, as the aim of the surveillance was to establish whether or not there was a sustained link between our independent variables and dependent variables. In order to establish any correlation, it was necessary to have a systematic and standardized method for gauging variation.

In order to collect data regarding our research, the group compiled a pilot survey to be completed by the general public in face-to-face interviews at two different locations.

The group met on a Monday morning in one of the busiest streets in the City Centre. Our aim was to interview people outside of a typical drinking environment and contrast this with the opinions of those in a setting where drinking was socially acceptable (for example, the Student Union). This helped us to demonstrate that the social setting was influential to the respondents' answers in the questionnaire. We found that those in the street were more supportive of the restricted licensing laws, whereas those in

the student union were more in support of the laws which increased longer periods of alcohol at cheap prices.

### **What factors influenced your choice of research methods?**

We decided to use self-completion questionnaires for several reasons. Firstly, since we had to adhere to a strict two-week time period to have all data collected, we decided that a survey would be quicker to accomplish. As a group we met up twice over the two-week period to interview the general public on the streets of Glasgow and in the Student Union. With each of us having to interview 10 respondents we agreed that the most appropriate way to do this was through the use of self-completion surveys which could be filled out in a matter of minutes. This method also increased the validity of the responses, and we anticipated that respondents would be more honest about their answers to a sensitive subject.

As we didn't have the benefit of collecting additional data through interviews, the survey we developed contained a mixture of both closed and open questions. We used the closed questions to acquire more specific responses on areas such as education, employment, age, religion, etc. In the Likert Scale format, all statements related to different aspects of the research project, including general questions about self, drinking behaviour, support for the laws, and perceived effectiveness of the laws.

However, three open questions were included which gave the respondent an opportunity to further explain their opinion towards the licensing laws and their desired effect on drinking behaviour. This information greatly aided our project as it provided us with more in-depth responses.

### **How did you choose your sample and what principles guided your sampling?**

Respondents were chosen on the basis of their willingness to participate in the study alone. Therefore, the sample of respondents included were the result of accidental sampling.

### **Did you encounter any difficulties constructing your research instrument(s)? Please indicate what they were and how you dealt with them.**

Our independent variables were age, gender, religion, educational attainment and employment status, with our dependent variable being support for the licensing laws. To measure the variables, we incorporated 13 closed questions. The majority of these were Likert scales which included options from 'strongly agree' through to 'opposed' along with a response option of 'other, please specify', three open questions and two scales. Due to the abundance of IVs, our study encompassed several hypotheses for each factor.

The pilot survey was revised three times before we proceeded to use it with the public. This was in order to make the questionnaire as specific as possible and ensure that no unnecessary questions were asked. The final survey contained 10 questions, some of which were open, and others closed. We included several 'No opinion' and 'other' options to ensure validity. The main types within each variable were then identified (for instance Protestant, Catholic and 'No religion' for the religion variable). All other surveys that contained one or more of the less common attributes were discarded.

### **What were your research questions?**

One of our research questions focused on whether or not the implementation of the Licensing Act would affect people's attitudes towards drinking. Furthermore, a second research question asked was whether there was significant support in response to these changes to the act.

### **Did you experience any ethical difficulties at any point in your research?**

Since a lot of the questions related to drinking, respondents who did not drink at all may have felt excluded but had an equally strong opinion on drinking in Scotland. Questions included how often you drink, what do you drink etc.

Moreover, initially we had intended to carry out the survey using a face-to-face method. We felt that this would be the most beneficial to us as it would allow us to clarify questions that could potentially be asked. It would also help to motivate participants, by possibly building up a rapport with respondents to make the process more enjoyable and worthwhile to them.

However, in practice we found that this option was not the most practical solution. This was due to a number of factors such as the weather, time constraints with the respondent and personal preference. People who were willing to carry out the survey for us preferred to fill it in themselves in order to get through it quickly. If they then needed any points clarified, we were on hand to answer their queries. Another reason for this may have been related to the fact that the survey was asking personal and sensitive questions in relation to their drinking behaviour. I believe this increased the reliability of the results as people were likely to be more honest about their attitudes and behaviour with regards to drinking if surveyors could not associate their answers with the individual.

### **Did you encounter any difficulties at this stage and if so, how did you deal with them?**

The main problem was there was a lack of similar studies on the licensing laws in the UK, and as a result of this, we had to instead focus on studies which came from other Western and European nations. This required some in-depth research using various different resources such as books, journals and online articles.

My research project supervisor was incredibly helpful. Although he promoted the group to work independently, he was always there in person or via email if we had any problems or queries with our project. Through regular tutorials he ensured that we were familiar with all types of research design and research method which aided our project greatly. Moreover, as he was a member of the DEC, he kept us right with what we could and could not do straight away (for example, we had wanted to interview respondents in bars) instead of having to wait for approval.

### **What are the main lessons that you have learned from this process? Are there any aspects of the research that you would like to have done differently?**

Gain ethical approval before planning or starting any aspect of the research project. Our group in particular faced many ethical barriers in terms of what we could ask people and where we could ask it.

Initially, we had had a completely different research question to what we used in the end – this was due to it being rejected by ethics, meaning we had to completely change our research project which cost us time and effort.

Another lesson is, if it is a group project, then work as a group! It was incredibly beneficial to our project that we met up regularly, spoke over the internet regularly and decided on everything as a group. It also meant that our final report was sewn together and flowed instead of being a lot of different sections by different people flung together. Group work also helps build rapport with the people you are working with, this makes the whole process from research to data collection to data analysis much easier as you feel more confident in asking questions and ensuring everyone is working well.

**If you had one bit of advice to give to students who are about to begin working on their research projects, what would it be?**

Do not just research your topic of interest, research AROUND it. There may always be areas of the topic you had not thought to research which may be key to your project by offering another dimension (for example, we start with support for licensing laws and lead to correlating this with attitude and behaviour towards drinking – paving the way for further research in this area).

**How did you go about analyzing the data?**

We analyzed the data using a combination of tallying scores and the statistical computing package, SPSS 17.0 (PASW). The tallying helped to identify trends and correlation between the different variables. SPSS produced tables with a range of means, modes and cross-tabs for each variable which we then condensed and analyzed.

**What problems did you encounter at this stage, if any, and how did you succeed in overcoming them?**

Because there were two research questions, different aspects of the analysis had to be used to identify different trends. For the research question on evidence of support for drinking laws, we focused on the means which illustrated support for them as dictated by SPSS. To identify whether changes in licensing legislation were affecting public attitudes, we examined the cross-tabs which showed any correlation between our independent variables and respondents' perceived opinion of how effective the laws were.

**How did you go about writing up your research project?**

As this was a group assignment, each member of the group chose which part of the report they felt they were most comfortable with. We then independently focused on each section that we chose, before working closely together to ensure that the report flowed and all information presented was consistent.

For my section, I focused on the method and the results. As my sections were crucial to other sections – introduction, conclusions etc., I had to ensure that I had them completed quickly and was then able to assist the other members of the group in completing theirs. As a group we compiled the final report for submission by meeting for regular study sessions. These meetings were particularly beneficial to

completing the project as it ensured that all group members were working efficiently and could receive help if they needed it.

**Did you encounter any problems in the writing process and, if so, how did you overcome them?**

As a group study, it was often hard to arrange a time when everyone was available. Hence, a lot of online communication was used to ensure all sections of the report were progressing adequately. Another slight technical complication regarded PASW. As this was a new edition of the software program SPSS, it often was not compatible with older versions of the software or different models of computer – this was a significant problem as tables and graphs from PASW which we used in the report and would not appear for printing. Therefore, I would suggest that tables and graphs found in PASW were used as a guideline, and other more common software such as Microsoft Excel was used for any graphs you wish to present in your research project.