Content Issues in Students' Research Proposals

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Abstract

The purpose of this contextualized study is to explore typical content issues in master's degree students' research proposals. Comments in collated reviewer forms for twenty proposals referred back for corrections by a school research committee were analyzed, clustered into themes and interpreted. Seven themes were identified, namely: logical continuity, superficiality, justification of choices, subjectivity, and research proposal sections, foundational methodological knowledge, and technicalities. The findings demonstrate students' lack of in-depth understanding of the elements of a research proposal and how they 'hang together', and that they fail to appreciate the important of staying focused on a central research question. They are also unable to apply textbook knowledge to 'flesh out' the proposal. Lastly, they exhibit an unscientific mindset. Based on the findings it is recommended that research proposal writing guidelines should include clear and comprehensive examples of proposal elements. However, guidelines alone do not provide enough information to steer students in the right direction. They should also participate in "nitty-gritty" proposal writing assignments. In addition, scaffolding as well as proposal sampling should be used to develop their research proposal writing skills.

Keywords: *Research proposal; proposal writing; content issues; novice researchers; postgraduate students*

1. Introduction

Any academic whom has served as a member of an institutional research committee could most probably write volumes about their frustrations with the endless cycle of rewriting and resubmission of sub-standard research proposals submitted by students that they, as committee members, have to scrutinize and evaluate. Over the years scholars have also commented on the problems that students experience with proposal writing (See, for example, Baker, 2000; Ellis & Levy, 2009; Iqbal, 2007).
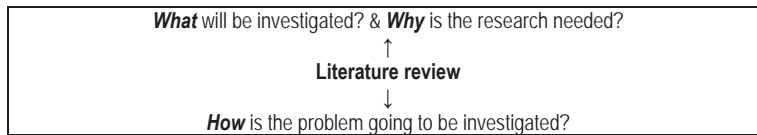
Empirical findings on typical content issues in students' research proposals are limited. In general, the majority of scholars whom provide recommendations on how to improve the quality of research proposals mainly draw on their own research and supervisory experience to identify proposal writing issues. Blanco and Lee (2012: 450) reflect on this practice in the following statement: 'We distilled challenges and effective strategies and approaches from our experience in writing and assisting with…research proposals'.

The aim of the present study is to appraise the quality of master's degree students' research proposals. The objective of the study is to analyze review forms completed by members of a research committee at a higher education institution in South Africa to identify recurring issues in the content research proposals submitted by students for approval. Based on the findings interventions are recommended to improve the quality of such proposals.

2. Literature Review

A 'good' research proposal has to provide answers to three key questions (Pellissier, 2007) as depicted in Figure 1. The 'what' and 'why' questions are addressed in the introductory sections (theoretical component) of a research proposal and the 'how' question is addressed in the design and methods sections (empirical component) of a proposal (Balakumar, Inamdar & Jagadeesh, 2013). Arguments and choices in the proposal have to be supported and justified by relevant and recent literature.

Figure 1: Key questions in research proposals

What will be investigated? & ***Why*** is the research needed?
↑
Literature review
↓
How is the problem going to be investigated?

2.1   Content issues in the theoretical component of a research proposal

2.1.1 The 'WHAT' question

'What a researcher wants to accomplish' is primarily linked to the formulation of a feasible research problem statement. Ellis and Levy (2008: 22) define a research problem as '… a general issue, concern, or controversy addressed in research'. One way to decrease the possibility of formulating an ambiguous research problem is to state it in the form of a central research question. The problem statement/central research question informs all aspects of a research project (Magilvy & Thomas, 2009). A tightly focused, precise research problem, supported and justified by scholarly literature is therefore the primary ingredient of a research proposal (Proctor, Powell, Baumann, Hamilton & Santens, 2012) and essential to the success of any research project.

Shapek (1995) analyzed reasons why more than 700 applications were denied by a federal funding agency. One of the common pitfalls that he identified is related to the research problem. In addition, Ellis and Levi (2008) regard vague problem formulation as one of the most serious problems in proposal writing. Researchers also tend to frame their problem statement in long-winded literature reviews (Kikula & Qorro, 2007). Therefore, many proposals are flawed because novice researchers do not understand the critical importance of a research problem statement (Porte, 1967; Sharkwai, 2008). As a result of this oversight to they fail to stay focused on the central research question (Evers, 2012). This lack of focus affects the coherence between the problem statement and the title, aim and objectives, and hypotheses (in quantitative research) or specific research questions (qualitative research), and is evident from a lack of direction and a failure to delimit the boundary conditions of a research project (Iqbal, 2007; Silverman, 2003).

Kikula and Qorro (2007) have also found that the majority of proposals evaluated in their study either did not contain clearly stated objectives or too many general objectives were included. In general, hypotheses/ specific research questions are also inadequately presented, absent, irrelevant, unclearly formulated or un-testable (Nelson & Goffman, 2006).

2.1.2 The 'WHY' question

The 'Why is the study needed?' question is answered by justifying the selection of a topic and creating a link between the research problem, aim and objectives of a study. The significance of a proposed project can only be established by citing seminal and relevant literature to demonstrate a gap in previous knowledge, contradictions from previous studies or to highlight concepts that need further explanation (Endacott, 2005; Lajom & Magno, 2010). It is essential that current state of knowledge regarding the topic of choice is summarizes precisely and concisely in a research proposal (Przeworski & Salomon, 1998). The expected outcomes and why they are potentially important in advancing the field of knowledge as well as the study's envisioned impact have to be explained (Davey, 2007).

A frequently occurring mistake is a failure to develop a coherent and persuasive argument for the proposed research and a lack of proper context to frame the problem statement (Ellis & Levy, 2008; Wong, 2002) and to demonstrate the significance of research projects clearly (IU GradGrants Centre, 2008). The findings of the investigation by Kikula and Qorro (2007) show that most proposal writers in their study did not fully comprehend the importance of a literature review. The biggest percentage of literature reviews in the research proposals in their study were inadequate or omitted, or lacked focus. Some researchers also fail to cite critical literature or to accurately present the theoretical and empirical contributions by other researchers (Wong, 2002). A statement that 'no previous research has been conducted on a topic of interest' is usually indicative of an inadequate literature search (Porte; 1967).

2.1.3 The 'HOW' question

The methodological component of a research proposal includes an outline of a justified strategy for conducting an

investigation in order to answer specific research questions or test hypotheses (APA, 2012). The research problem statement, objectives and specific research questions or hypotheses provide the foundation for the selection of a feasible research design, and research methods (Cadman, 2002).

Research designs can be described as qualitative or quantitative in approach. It is also possible to triangulate the two approaches, both in overall design and in the specific methods used in an investigation (APA, 2012). Research design informs sampling strategy as well as the choice of data collection methods and procedures, and data analysis techniques. Researchers have to explain their methodological choices clearly and in enough detail to demonstrate that the approach and research 'tools' are appropriate, feasible and judicious. In addition they have to provide a literature supported rationale for the choice of research design as well as research methods and procedures. Ethical issues should also be addressed (APA, 2012).

Unclear thinking could affect the methodological soundness of research proposals. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005), novice researchers are often confused about the distinction between research design and research methods. Novice researchers also find it difficult to select an appropriate research design and to justify their choices. A common mistake in research proposals identified Wong (2002) is that the research plan is not carefully designed and that the plan is vague, unfocused and not presented in concrete detail. Researchers also make mistakes in describing, explaining and justifying target populations and sampling strategies (Kikula & Qorro, 2007; Mercy College, 2013). In addition, wrong choices are made with regard to sampling and data collection methods, and research procedures and data analysis techniques are not justified or explained in enough detail (Wong, 2002).

2.1.4 Proposal writing skills

The quality of a research proposal depends not only on the quality of a proposed project, but also on the quality of a student's proposal writing. A viable research project may run the risk of rejection simply because the proposal is poorly organized, poorly written, carelessly prepared or because students fail to follow formatting instructions (Evers, 2012; IU GradGrants Centre, 2008; Murtaza; 2012).

The most common mistake found in research proposals is wordiness. All writing should be as terse and informative as possible. However, conciseness in expression is not readily achieved, in particular not by inexperienced students (Balakumar, et al, 2013). Poor language skills as well as inappropriate or irrelevant vocabulary could also impact negatively on the quality of a research proposal. The use of jargon should be avoided (Blanco & Lee, 2012). They emphasize the importance of using a scientific writing style and scientific language instead of a casual writing style. Many proposals also fail because of referencing errors such as the use of incomplete or outdated references (Nolinske, 1996; Przeworski & Salomon, 1998) or because of citation lapses and incorrect referencing (Evers, 2012).

2.2 Interventions to improve proposal writing

2.2.1 Institutional guidelines

There is a long standing recognition that postgraduate students need some kind of structured assistance when to write their research proposals (Swales & Feak, 2001). One kind of structured assistance provided by higher education institutions, as a matter of course, is the provision of research manuals or guidelines to familiarize students with institutional research policies and procedures. Most of these documents specify the required format and provide broad guidelines on the content of a research proposal (See, for example, University of Johannesburg, 2013; University of Limpopo, 2014; University of Pretoria, 2011; University of the Western Cape, 2012; Unizul, 2013). Most formatting problems can be rectified by ensuring that students conform to the structure prescribed by an institution. Kikula and Qorro (2007) stress that proposal writing manuals should be readily accessible to prospective writers of proposals and to those involved in assisting them in developing their proposal writing. Balakumar, et al (2013) recommend that researchers should attend to issues such as language, sentence construction, grammar and punctuation.

2.2.2 Research skills development

Scholars are aware that research methodology textbooks do not adequately prepare novice researchers for the real intricacies of drafting their proposals. As a result of this oversight many of them are unaware of the real complexities of proposal writing (Baker, 2000; Garcia & Nelson, 2003; Jabloski, 1999). A number of scholars and researchers (Frouws, 2007; Lajom & Magno, 2010; Rianey, 1974) have commented on the urgent need to redesign research methodology

courses/ modules at undergraduate and postgraduate levels to furnish students with the necessary knowledge and practical skills to write proposals. Special attention should be given to problematic aspects of proposal writing (Kikula & Qorro, 2007).

The critical evaluation of sampled research proposals to identify good and bad proposals has been advised (Kikula & Qorro, 2007; Rianey, 1974). Both Bradley (2001) and Rianey (1974) recommend the use of specific scenarios to engage students in developing problem statements and hypotheses or specific research questions. Rianey also suggests skills development activities such as distributing copies of a bibliography on proposal writing to students and have each of them write a report on how to write effective proposals as well as designing assignments that oblige students to use a wide variety of secondary sources of information.

Balakumar, et al (2013) propose the use of seminars (open discussions and professional dialogue) to sharpen postgraduate students' writing skills as well as their critical thinking skills. The findings of a study by Garcia and Nelson (2003) show that students benefit from open discussions; that the comments received from peers and professors help students to clarify and refine confusing ideas; that participation in a seminar accelerate the completion of proposals and stimulate solutions to problems through a cross-fertilization of ideas. Tan and Ng (2012) have successfully implemented a team-based Prepare-Intensive Coaching-Compete (PICC) model as an alternative to workshops and short courses to help novice researchers to write proposals in a short period of time.

3. Method

3.1 Research design

Research proposals submitted by students for approval to research committees in higher education institutions provide a viable source of information to highlight the problems that they experience with the content of their proposals. The focus of this article is research proposals submitted to a School Research Committee (SRC) at a university in South Africa. According to Patton (2002), documents can be used as a primary source of data in qualitative research. A content analysis of written documents has become an accepted means for data generation in qualitative research. An analysis of the content of documents includes finding, selecting, appraising and synthesizing data contained in documents into major themes, categories and case examples (Bowen, 2009).

3.2 Sampling

In one academic year 32 research proposals were submitted to the SRC. Only 37% of first submissions of the proposals submitted by students were approved. Permission was obtained to use the collated review forms for the 20 proposals referred back for revision as the sampling unit for this study.

3.3 Data collection

The students in the school are registered for a coursework master's degree. They have to conduct empirical research projects in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree. The SRC is comprised of senior academics mandated to evaluate submitted proposals during four quarterly meetings in an academic year. The SRC uses a semi-structured assessment form containing items that address issues related to the typical content of research proposals. The form provides ample space for comments. The comments are collated and discussed in the committee before a decision is reached to approve a proposal or to refer it back for corrections and revision. A check of the trustworthiness and credibility of the data is built into the SRC evaluation process. The accuracy of collated comments was confirmed when committee members discussed the transcripts during the meetings (member check). The forms that are included in the agendas for the SRC meetings were analyzed.

3.4 Data analysis

According to Creswell (1994), there is no single correct method for analyzing qualitative data. In the present study source material was used to generate ideas rather than to test pre-established hypotheses. Every separate comment in each of collated comment forms was identified, numbered and listed as recommended by Edwards (1991). An inductive approach was used to cluster the comments into general themes that appeared to be common to all collated comments. According to Thomas (2003: 1), two of the main purposes for using an inductive approach are to reduce raw text data through

repeated examination and comparison into a set of themes, and to establish clear links between research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data. Evidence to support each of the themes and to increase the confirmability of the findings is provided in tables that contain collated reviewers' comments and some questionable verbatim statements from research proposals that were evaluated (in *Italics*).

4. Findings

Seven general themes were extracted from the data analysis.

4.1 Lack of logical continuity

Students tend to deal with the different elements of proposals as separate units without considering the coherence between them as is demonstrated by the reviewer comments in Table 1.

Table 1: Logical Continuity

Nothing in the background section leads to the statement of the problem
Problem statement does not reflect the title
Aim does not flow from problem statement
Objectives are not in line with problem statement & aim
Research questions/hypotheses are not derived from objectives/are outside of the aim/objectives
No link between objectives and methodology
Information in different sections are repetitive

4.2 Superficiality

Proposals were referred back for corrections because of too many serious omissions (See Table 2). In general, the theoretical component of research proposals is characterized by numerous statements that are unsupported by documented literature. The design and methods sections are also not outlined in enough detail.

Table 2: Superficiality

It is not clear what the student wants to investigate and how the study will be conducted and the proposal is not clearly thought out or well argued
A plan will be designed to analyze the data
Data will be analyzed
The Introduction in inadequate and consists of a number of bullets instead of a discussion.
Contains incomplete information about the topic. What exactly is the problem under investigation? Not clearly defined
The proposal is rife with statements unsupported by relevant documented evidence
Lit review inadequate
No previous research has so far been conducted…
A limited or of use of primary sources and overuse of secondary, popular and WWW sources were also cited as reason why proposals were not approved.
Literature reviews are too narrowly focused on one aspect and excludes other important aspects; irrelevant to subject matter; or no previous research findings are included in the literature review.
No theoretical framework regarding the relationship between the variables of interest
Units of analysis not defined
Size of population not indicated
This is a sample not a population; no rational for choice of sample & sampling method
Not enough detail on sampling - *Sample size is medium to large*…
How will the questionnaire be developed?
Data gathering procedures not described in detail
Data analysis not outlined – *Data will be analyzed using appropriate methods for quantitative research*
Procedures for dealing with qualitative data not specified
Not clear if a hypothesis will be tested
Questionnaires & interviews envisioned but discussed only design of questionnaire not how interviews will be conducted and with whom

4.3 Lack of proper justification of choices

An acceptable rationale is not provided for choices made by students in answering the what, why and how questions (Table 3).

Table 3: Reviewers' Comments on Justification

Lack of basis for study – need to be supported by facts and reliable documents
No relevant references to support statements
Rationale for design choice not clear/not provided
Inappropriate justification for use of a exploratory design
No rationale for choice of study area
Rational for choice of population and sample not provided
Wrong/no rational for choice of sampling and sample size
Wrong rationale for choice of instruments (*I will not use interviews because they are costly*).

4.4 Subjectivity

Students base their arguments exclusively on their own observations or, more disturbingly, provide premature answers to research questions (Table 4).

Table 4: Reviewers' Comments on Subjectivity

Not a problem statement but pre-selected solutions to problem for example, *The training is insufficient: They have technical skills but not the necessary communication skills and methods to allow dialogue-orientated advisory work.*
Already answers the research question, namely *that PA is not implemented,* instead of investigating if this is true
Subject selection because candidate *knows the population*?
Overestimation of effects/significance of study
Cannot base the rationale for a scientific study on the "observations of the researcher".

4.5 Confusion about elements of a research proposal

Students are confused about what specifically to include in the different sections of a research proposal as is evident from the comments in Table 4.

Table 4: Reviewers' Comments on Proposal Elements

The Introduction reads like a literature review
Lit. review not background
No background and motivation for the proposed study to focus the study
Significance of study not indicated
No problem statement is provided
No clear aim, rather significance of the study and some methodological statements
Explain how literature should be done instead of doing it
Literature review narrowly focused on one aspect and excludes other important aspects
Do not explain what aspects of study would employ qualitative methodology & why
No previous research findings included in literature review
Literature review presents research issues not relevant to subject matter
Definition of concepts lack references; 'common' definitions not needed
Solutions not hypotheses
Questions should cover all the objectives
Student explain what a research design is instead of describing the design of his study
Provides a textbook discussion of population, qualitative research, the concept of sampling, data collection methods and data analysis methods
Ethical considerations not addressed in practical terms
Just list ethical principles without indicating how ethical principles will be applied.

4.6   Foundational methodological knowledge

Students are in general unable to apply their textbook knowledge to choose an appropriate research design and research methods as is evident from Table 6.

Table 6: Methods

A hybrid of empirical and non-empirical studies will be used
The qualitative method will be used
Use large sample size but envisions *both quantitative and qualitative types of designs*
Random stratified sampling will be used to select volunteers.
Structured interviews will be used to collect qualitative data
Unstructured interviews will be conducted with 200 people
Sample size is not feasible for qualitative interviewing
Random sampling but all employees will be selected
Do not choose but just list questionnaire, interviews and observation as instruments (*Questionnaire, interviews, observation, focus groups and secondary sources will be used*)
Structured interview schedule/questionnaire for qualitative research
How/why generalize if it is a qualitative study?

4.7   Technicalities

Poor editing, wordiness and the use of unscientific language affect the quality of proposals submitted for evaluation (Table 7).

Table 7: Reviewers' Comments on Technicalities

References not listed alphabetically
Sources not listed or listed sources not used in text
Web site resources should show date of access
Grammatical and punctuation errors/proper editing needed
To many loose paragraphs
Unscientific language (*The purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in or on someone else's mind*)
The student should be motivated to simplify his presentation and to avoid long winded discussions

5.   Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study confirm that academics involved in research supervision are cognizant of the problems that their students experience with research proposal writing as highlighted in the literature review. A number of scholars have commented that students are not adequately prepared for the real intricacies of drafting their research proposals. As a result of this oversight many of them are unaware of the real complexities of proposal writing (Baker, 2000; Garcia & Nelson, 2003; Jabloski, 2003; Rainey, 2000). In addition, many researchers struggle with research proposal formulation due to a lack of actual research experience (Iqbal, 2007). Students are also not sure how to organize the content of their proposals (Ellis & Levi, 2008). Hench, they may omit important proposal elements or fail to provide sufficient detail about critical issues (Nyika, 2014; Przeworski & Salomon, 1998; Wong, 2002).

A deficiency in research readiness as well a lack of foundational research methodological knowledge and skills in applying such knowledge to proposal writing is clearly evident from the findings of the present study. Students are unsure of what to include in the different sections of their proposals. In addition, a failure in the development of a scientific mindset in students surfaces as subjectivity and bias in proposal writing. Language, referencing and editing oversights suggest that students do not appreciate the importance of a research proposal and that they therefore do not make an effort of address the technical quality of their proposals.

Furthermore, the findings of the study indicate that the quality of both the theoretical and methodological components of research proposals could be compromised by unclear and muddled thinking as suggested by Shah, Shah and Pietrobon (2009) and Sharkawi (2008). Inconsistencies in argumentation and a lack of coherence between the different components of research proposals demonstrate that students do not think holistically when they write their proposals. It can only be assumed they are unaware of how important it is to keep their central research questions in

mind when they amplify their research ideas, conduct literature reviews and select research approaches and methods.

The indispensability of concise and sufficient information to allow committees to make informed decisions about the quality of a proposal, and the feasibility of the research project, as recommended by Nyika (2014) and Przeworski and Salomon (1998), are also overlooked by students. In addition, students apparently do not realize how critical it is to provide an acceptable rationale, supported by relevant literature to motivate their choices.

Therefore, students have to be equipped with tools, skills and practice to write proposals. Access to research manuals/guidelines and exposure to conventional research methodology courses and workshops to prepare them for research proposal writing is not enough. Based on the findings it is recommended that research proposal writing guidelines should include clear, comprehensive sets of examples of the different proposal elements.

Students should participate in "nitty-gritty" proposal writing assignments. The design of effective research experiences taking into account students' lack of research readiness is recommended. 'Scaffolding' is useful to develop research skills in students. This technique is used to break skills apart and work on those that have to be developed. It is also useful to demonstrate the linkage between difference sections of a research proposal.

It is essential to build students' skills in constructing the different key elements of research proposals. Practical engagement in research, such as presentations, data analysis exercises, questionnaire construction, and the evaluation ethical issues in research are recommended. Research proposal sampling is also essential to demonstrate differences between 'good' and 'bad' proposals or to allow students to critically evaluate the content of research proposals.

It is the duty of all academics to cultivate a new generation of emerging researchers. They have to produce students equipped with a spirit of inquiry and a zest for problem solving. Students have to be encouraged to read critically, communicate persuasively and, above all, to think for themselves. An analysis of reviewers' comments provides insight into common proposal writing issues. All academics involved in supervising students, such as master's degree students whom are engaged in their first independent research projects, should take note of the comments of reviewers. This will help them to understand what committees look for in research proposals, what factors affect the quality of research proposals in their institutions, and to increase the acceptance rate of research proposals submitted by their students.

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