

Trials and Trepidations of Writing a Research Proposal for Libyan Postgraduate Students: Developing a Framework for Writing a Proposal

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ABSTRACT

Libyan prospective researchers often experience a challenging and stressful time in their effort to outline a research proposal. This paper investigates the difficulties and apprehensions of writing a research proposal experienced by Libyan postgraduate students. Over the last two decades Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) worldwide have invested considerably in the development of and support for prospective researchers. This paper seeks to guide novice researchers through the research proposal labyrinth and to enable them to make a more informed decision about their research proposal writing. The study adopted qualitative and quantitative research methods. Data were collected through interviews involving 15 postgraduate students from Libyan Universities in Tripoli. Moreover, a sample of 55 questionnaires were used to gauge respondents' views and experiences writing a research proposal. The findings revealed that Libyan prospective students are not aware of any guidelines on how to write a research proposal. The study also found that the majority of respondents admitted that their research proposal writing was a guess work, left to the imagination of individual student. Research students had insufficient knowledge of the relevant research proposal writing requirements, lack of clear guidelines and support. The results also showed that participants held different expectations and perceptions of their individual ability and skills in writing a successful research proposal. To date, there is no empirical study that has addressed the challenges faced by Libyan research students. Finally, this study recommends that the provision of a clear research proposal writing framework to be made available to future researchers.

المخلص

يواجه معظم الباحثين الليبيين تحديات كبيرة عند كتابة ورقاتهم ومحوثهم العلمية. لذلك، تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على بعض التحديات التي تواجه طلبة الدراسات العليا بالجامعات الليبية. ورغم التجارب والمحاولات الكثيرة التي تهتم بهذا المجال لتحسين مستوى كتابة البحوث إلا أن ما زالت هناك تحديات تواجه الطلبة لتكون كتاباتهم في المستوى

المطلوب. وتحاول هذه الدراسة توضيح طبيعة وأهداف كتابة الخطط البحثية وأعدمت في ذلك طريقة البحث النوعي. حيث جمعت المعلومات عن طريق مقابلة عينة من طلبة الدراسات العليا (خمسة عشر طالبا) بجامعة طرابلس. بالإضافة الى عينة متكونة من (خمس وخمسون) استبيان استخدمت كعينة اساسية. وأعدمت الدراسة إجابات هذه العينة لمعرفة آراء وتجارب الطلاب في كتابة الخطط البحثية. أظهرت النتائج أن طلاب الدراسات العليا اللبيين لم يتلقوا أي نوع من التدريب على كتابة الخطط البحثية وبينت من خلال إجابات العينة أن أغلب الطلاب ليس لديهم مرجعية علمية تسهل عليهم الكتابة، بل يقدمون أعمال افتراضية يغلب عليه الظن والشكوك في أكثر الأحيان، ما يجعل خطط البحث التي يقدمونها تكتنفها مشاكل كثيرة. وأظهرت النتائج أيضًا أن طلبة الدراسات العليا ليس لديهم دراية بمتطلبات كتابة الخطط البحثية بشكل صحيح. وهناك التباين في أفكار وآراء وتوقعات وفهم هؤلاء الطلاب للخطط البحثية

KEYWORDS: research proposal, framework, requirements, novice researchers

Introduction

Writing a research proposal is a significant part of postgraduate studies at many universities around the world. For many postgraduate students entering university, writing a research proposal is a shot in the dark, as little knowledge of what a research proposal entails, nor do they recognize its importance. A research proposal is meant to persuade people that you have a viable study idea and that you have the necessary expertise and work plan to complete it. Paul and Psych (2012) argue that a research proposal should convince others that your topic is worthy of researching and that you have the research potential to see it through to completion. There are numerous challenges

that postgraduate students face when writing a proposal including, broad topics, insufficient literature, failure to provide proper context to frame research questions, inadequate assistance from supervisors. Similarly, the research proposal often lacks organization and structure. Applicants have limited time and resources to complete the work and inadequate assistance from supervisors. Regardless of students' research area and the methodology they choose, all research proposals must address the following questions: what students plan to accomplish, why they want to do it and how they are going to do it? According to Nawangouli and Arsana (2012) a good research proposal must have an interesting title, the background must be clear and support the research, and the research statement must be clearly articulated and supported by the purpose and aims and underpinned by previous literature studies.

Research Questions:

In order to achieve the aims of this paper the following research questions have been formulated:

- What are the challenges experienced by Libyan postgraduate students in preparing their research proposals?

- What are the enablers for developing a successful research proposal?

Research objectives:

In order to examine the issue raised by this research the following research objectives have been set:

- 1) To analyse the current problems and challenges experienced by Libyan postgraduate students in writing their research proposals.
- 2) To determine the enablers for developing a successful research proposal.
- 3) To explore and evaluate postgraduate students' perceptions and experiences in writing their research proposals.
- 4) To make recommendations based on the findings of this study on how to enhance writing their research proposals capabilities.

Statement of the problem

The issue of research proposal writing to access universities in developing countries and in particular Libya is under researched in the literature. There is a dearth of studies on the research proposal writing regarding Libyan research students, yet it is of paramount importance for prospective students to know what the potential challenges are, so that they are ready and equipped to face them. It is axiomatic to say that the majority of Libyan students are unprepared

and not research ready. There are uninformed about the basic research requirements. Others have unrealistic and inflated expectations about their research capabilities which have not been put to the test. Many have no previous research experience and start with no research topic in mind and expect supervisors to suggest a title. Some arrive with ready-made research proposals or ideas which appear to be interesting to them but not to everyone else- lacking depth and below the post graduate degree level. Novice students experience a culture shock and can feel deflated and frustrated as a result of lack of familiarity with postgraduate system and procedures. Postgraduate regulations and procedures in HE in Libya are often non-existent or negligible. Being unaware of the standard of work expected at postgraduate level, it is common for students to feel lost at this stage. They are unsure of what is expected of them or where to go for assistance.

Literature Review

Although the writing and presentation of a research proposal is crucial, there is a paucity of studies devoted to this important research area. Writing a research proposal has become an important graduate outcome of higher education institution to obtain a higher degree. A limited

number of previous studies have investigated students' perceptions of the difficulty of preparing research proposals. Manchishi *et al.* (2015) conduct a study to determine the common mistakes committed and challenges faced by postgraduate students in the school of education at the University of Zambia. Their findings reveal the following students' difficulties in writing the proposal: unavailability of lecturers for consultations, negative comments from supervisors, lack of materials, limited time in writing the proposal, and lack of coordination between directorate and graduate studies. The difficulty that postgraduate students have in writing research proposal is a global trend in both prominent and less prominent universities. A study conducted in Sweden reveals that students encountered difficulties in assessing information related to their research and culture shock (Ezebilo, 2012). The study reveals that there was a lack of postgraduate preparation and insufficient mentoring studies. Because a lack of direction and language challenges, some students lacked confidence in presenting their work. Keyvandarian and Afaali (2019) conduct a study which attempts to determine the types of issues that postgraduate EFL learners have while writing their thesis proposal. The findings reveal that discourse and language challenges were among the most often

encountered concerns. However, a research proposal must fulfil three standards in order to be approved. Firstly, it should demonstrate that the project is significant, relevant, and doable. Secondly, the research provides a new or a fresh perspective and has the potential of benefitting humanity and the research community. Thirdly, the investigation may be finished within the required time frame. In this regard, Monash University (2014:2) highlights key aspects that research proposals should contain and students should be aware of: (1) demonstrate that [they] are engaged in genuine inquiry, learning about something worthwhile in a specific context; (2) link their proposed work with the work of others, while demonstrating they are familiar with major schools of thought relevant to the topic; (3) establish a particular theoretical orientation; and (4) establish [their] methodological approach.

The concept of Research Proposal

A research proposal is a concise and coherent summary of the students proposed research. It sets out the central issues or questions that students intend to address. It outlines the general area of study within which the students' research falls, referring to the current state of knowledge and any recent debates on the topic. It also

demonstrates the originality of the students proposed research (Birmingham University, 2022). Research is a fairly broad phrase for any activity that includes learning things in a more or less organized manner. A more scholarly perspective is that research entails exploring topics to provide fresh and novel ideas. It is about pushing the boundaries of knowledge. The researcher determines that this type of study is academic research since it employs a scientific and methodical approach to discovering, verifying, and advancing information (Nicholas, 2011).

A research proposal, according to Kabir (2016), is a document created by a researcher that gives a full explanation of how the proposed programme is going to be achieved. It functions similarly to an outline of the complete research process, providing the reader with a summary of the facts addressed in a project. In short, research proposals are informative and interesting pieces of writing since they try to find out something new and persuade the reader that the work is worth undertaking. The prospective researcher's aim is to demonstrate that interesting findings are achievable and are likely to have practical implications. A research proposal is a key requirement for students to provide a clear description of the research plan and the roadmap to be followed to obtain a Masters or doctoral

degree. The research proposal determines the specific areas of research, states the purpose, scope, methodology, contribution to knowledge, overall organization, and limitations of the study.

The Importance of a Research Proposal in Higher Education

The importance of a research proposal is underscored by the fact that failing to produce a research proposal that fulfils the research criteria and meets the required university research standard may result in rejection from a higher degree research programme. It also outlines clearly the research aim and stages to achieve a positive outcome. This helps students to evaluate the topic's potential to contribute to knowledge and benefit other researchers and to think through the research idea and anticipate any problem that are likely to encounter. In addition, the major reason for the proposal is that the reader is convinced of the importance of a project and the ability of the researchers have the stamina and research skills to reach their goal. Finally, researcher must demonstrate that they have a workable plan to embark on a research journey and that the study is worth undertaking (Milgram, 2019).

Research Proposal challenges

Worldwide the completion rate for post graduate students ranges from poor to abysmal (Lubbe *et al.* 2005). The responsibility for this must be shared by candidates, supervisors and the institutions to which they belong. In particular, supervisors create a number of problems that cause post graduate students' studies to derail. Research suggests that up to half of the students who begin post graduate studies do not complete their studies at all (Golde and Dore 2001). This is because there are a wide variety of problems that students face, the main issue seems to be the supervisor-supervisee relationship. Little discussion is taking place, and little research progress is being done (Lubbe *et al.* 2005). In a study on experiences of post graduate students, Golde and Dore (2001) point out that more than 40% of the postgraduate students reported that they would opt for a different topic if they could start all over again, while 46% stated that they would select a different supervisor if they were allowed or given the opportunity to pick their own supervisory team. About a third of the respondents highlighted that they would select a different field if they had to redo their post graduate studies (Lubbe *et al.* 2005). Clearly, the selection of the right topic and the right supervisor are crucial because post

graduate study is in theory supposed to be an interesting learning process of honing research skills, developing analytical and critical skills and optimising and enhancing a candidate's future career.

Ahmed and Mahboob (2016) analyse difficulties faced by postgraduate students in Pakistan when writing their research proposals. They discover that these include challenges with writing the background, introduction part, generating research questions, choosing the right technique and data gathering methods, and writing references. As a result, the researchers advise that universities offer additional research technique courses and writing workshops, as well as construct well-equipped research facilitation centres, to assist students in overcoming the problems of producing research proposals. Finally, Kivunja (2016) discover as a supervisor that many postgraduate students failed to draft solid research proposals. In response, he undertook a theoretical research to define the components of a successful research proposal and to outline the necessary techniques for guiding postgraduate students in efficiently writing research proposals.

Research proposal writing experienced by Libyan postgraduate research students

Libyan postgraduate research students are not a homogeneous group. The diversity of the postgraduate student population indicates there is no one fits all student experience or student profile. Each has different concerns/issues – academic/personal - some have knowledge gaps, others lack research experience. As a result, postgraduate students need different kinds and levels of support.

The Libyan research students experienced the following challenges in writing their research proposal.

- Difficulties related to selecting a workable and doable research topic.
- Difficulties in writing an appropriate proposal title for their research.
- Difficulties in determining the aim or purpose of the study.
- Difficulties in setting the background/introduction section.
- Difficulties in formulating research questions/hypotheses.
- Difficulties writing, selecting and justifying research methodology and methods.
- Difficulties in analysing and discussing quantitative and qualitative data.
- Difficulties in writing and reporting the results.

- Lack of proper guidance.
- Insufficient time for research.
- Lack of commitment to research
- Lack of research culture in the University.
- Hostile and unstable external environment in the country as a whole.

Research Proposal Writing Framework

The proposal should highlight the relevance of the planned study and make explicit the specific issues to be addressed. It also includes formulating the research questions and objectives that the research is meant to answer or hypotheses to be tested. The following is a suggested framework for a research proposal is a synthesis drawn from the literature:

a. The title of the research proposal

- the candidate's name and student number;
- the name of the University;
- the name of the degree sought;
- the date of submission.

b. Abstract

The abstract should be short (not more than 250 words), self-contained, concise and readable. It should be a standalone description of the proposed research, what is

intended to be done, why it needs to be done and what the results will mean for theory and/or practice.

c. Introduction/literature review

The introduction to the proposal should provide a clear rationale for the research and describe the background to the proposed research based on existing theoretical literature, conceptual framework, or assumptions that underpin the research. The proposal should demonstrate the significance of the proposed research and make clear the specific issues that are to be addressed, thus leading to a concise statement of the questions and objectives that the research is designed to answer or the hypotheses that are to be tested.

The objective is to demonstrate, through careful use of the literature, how the proposed research will make a substantial and original contribution to knowledge. Note that the review of the literature is shorter and more focused than that required for the final thesis. The literature review is in essence a process of highlighting key previous arguments, identifying the merits and acknowledge the value of others' work. Thus comparing and contrasting researchers' approaches and conclusions in your area of

research, identifying the gaps in the literature by highlighting areas which require further research and development.

Research methodology and methods

Following a systematic review of the relevant literature, the outcomes of such a review will inform and underpin the research methodology and methods to be adopted by the researcher. Each research method consists of a number of different stages, all of which are followed through systematically. Essentially, planning how data will be collected and justifying what data collection instruments will be used. Knowing how the data will be processed is essential to deciding not only what data to collect but also in what form it can be collected. Present an overview of the various data collection techniques. Discuss possible advantages and disadvantages of the various data collection techniques. Explain at what times qualitative research techniques are most useful and when quantitative techniques are more appropriate. What are the advantages of combining quantitative and qualitative research techniques?

Summary

Checklist for revising a research proposal

- Does the content match the title?
- Is the problem clearly formulated?
- Is the rationale, motivation, justification for undertaking your topic clearly articulated?
- Is the content within each section appropriate?
- Is there a logical sequence?
- Are sources acknowledged?
- Is referencing consistent?
- Does the literature and methodology relate to your research objectives?
- Do the conclusions relate to the objectives?
- Have you followed the conventions and regulations of your chosen university?
- Is the meaning of each sentence clear - or open to interpretation?

Methods of Data Collection for this study

This study was conducted adopting qualitative and quantitative approaches. The motivation for adopting qualitative method is that it allowed the researcher to gauge directly the respondents' views themselves by interacting with the respondents and hearing their views, voices, perceptions and expectations in detail. 15 research students were interviewed to discuss their experiences writing their research proposal for admission to do

postgraduate research at Libyan universities starting from preparation of a research proposal to submission of a thesis. In addition, a sample of 55 valid questionnaires out of a total out of 75, were analysed. Research strategies are not mutually-exclusive. Different strategies are often combined to support each other, e.g. exploring the results of a questionnaire survey with in-depth interviews to explore key results to provide a full picture of the topic under investigation (Saunders et al 2012; Menacere, 2016). Thus, a qualitative approach is best for investigating a little-known or poorly-understood phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Qualitative method is also best for areas that received very little attention in the literature. Whereas these areas, which have unknown variables, needs to be fully treated and covered sufficiently to open doors for future research which, in turn, are necessary to broaden the views and provide insights that contribute to the literature (Patton 2002).

Results and Discussion

The questionnaire responses for the first theme (What are your reasons for undertaking postgraduate studies?) reveal that the majority of respondents, 95% are undertaking postgraduate studies to upgrade qualification, 90% to pursuit knowledge, 80% for personal fulfilment, 70% for

better employment prospects, and 50% for lack of employment.

In response to the second theme (What is your level of awareness on how to undertake research?) the responses indicated that 50% were not able to make use of online references and resources. More than 85%, lack of knowledge of research methodology and methods, where 69% suggested that they do not have the knowledge on how to conduct literature and nor how to cite their sources. Others pointed out that they have problems and challenges in writing and reporting the results 75%. However, 80% of participants agreed that they lack the research skills necessary in selecting research tools, data collection, and data analysis. These findings are consistent with earlier research (Ahmed & Mahboob, 2016; Pietersen, 2014) suggesting that academic institutions need to support prospective postgraduate students with appropriate guidelines, to enhance their chance of submitting a workable and interesting research proposal. The findings of the third theme (What were the challenges you faced writing a Research Proposal?) showed that the respondents agreed on the lack of proper guidance 98%, as postgraduate students require some type of structural guidance when

writing a research proposal (Pieterse, 2014). In agreement with the literature post graduate students, 80% lack basic understanding and logical structure, limited ability to critically review and synthesize literature, and lack of critical thinking during the writing process (Wong, 2012). Furthermore, 65 % of students had trouble selecting a research topic, writing a research proposal, understanding thesis style, and reviewing the literature, which is consistent with past findings (Chareman, 2013; Wang & Yang, 2012). The studies also found that preparing the literature review component of the study proposal was the most difficult task for 85 % of the students.

As a result, students are unable to select reading resources that will assist them through the study phase, making locating them a difficulty for the appropriate literature. While 75% of the participants reported difficulties in locating research-relevant materials and a lack of a research culture at their university, this is consistent with the literature (Manchishi, *et al.* 2018).

The qualitative findings aimed at exploring in depth the opinions of post graduate students regarding the experience in writing a research proposal, confirmed the findings from quantitative. As a result, the interviews with the

participants revealed that students are not fully prepared for complexities of writing research proposals. Many of them were not aware of the true intricacies of proposal writing. However, students' were unsure of what to include in different sections of their proposal. They also lacked the ability to create realistic study statement about the topic, specifically since they do not read enough before drafting their proposals, Therefore special attention should be given to problematic aspects of proposal writing (Pietersen, 2014).

Furthermore, the participants were requested to give recommendations on how to enhance applicant's research proposal writing. The replies were very useful and relevant and can be summed up as follows:

- Provision of research proposal writing guidance.
- Access to previous quality research proposals.
- Workshops should be organized to prepare and inform research students about research proposal writing requirements.
- Providing seminars about core areas in research as background to the study, literature review and statement of the problem.

Conclusion

This study gauged the perceptions on the challenges faced by Libyan postgraduate students writing the research

proposal. The conclusion that can be drawn is that, writing a postgraduate research proposal is a testing and nerve wracking experience full of uncertainties and trepidations. It fundamentally requires pre-knowledge, preparedness and support especially for novice researchers and post graduate students. The study found that the majority postgraduate Libyan students have shown limited understanding and knowledge on how to plan and outline a research proposal. Findings showed that Libyan universities lag behind compared to western universities, in terms of providing a clear framework and support to prospective postgraduate students. The study also revealed that these issues are exacerbated by lack of research resources, rudimentary research facilities, low morale and lack of trust in the supervisory team who often are themselves not research active, unprepared, untrained and demoralised.

This study findings will contribute to raise awareness about the plight of Libyan postgraduate students in writing research proposals, which remains under-researched. The study findings will lead to fresh information about Libyan university policies regarding the necessary support for postgraduate students. The findings can assist in the formulation of a better policy/strategy on how to enhance

the implementation of a research proposal writing guidelines based on the findings of the study. Future prospective researchers can benefit from the results of this study by understanding the key requirements of drafting a successful postgraduate research proposal.

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