

# Hands-on Postgraduate Research Proposal Design

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide an account of empirical research among postgraduate first-time researchers regarding what skills are required to develop sound quality research proposals. The authors identify challenges that novice researchers encounter when designing their research proposals. The first of these challenges is to design a problem statement. The second challenge is how the researcher identifies an appropriate theoretical framework that is compatible with the problem set under investigation. This contribution also explains how the matrix method of literature review could be used ensure a review only references that relate to the problems under investigation.

**Keywords:** word quality, difficulties, research proposal, University, design, challenge, writing skills.

## Introduction

This article provides background information that novice researchers could use when writing a research. The common mistakes and challenges students encounter during the process of designing the research proposal are identified (Simelane 2015). Writing a research proposal is a source of anxiety for most students according to Onwuegbuzie (1997) who argues that many students feel lost in face of the novelty of the research process, by being pressured by time restrictions and stressed by the forthcoming evaluation of their work.

## **Problem Statement**

The need for this study is apparent with all the queries from postgraduate students for formatting good proposals. Sharts-Hopko (2000) argues that to start analysing the context for postgraduate research proposals, researchers also need to keep in mind the levels of knowledge and expectations of their eventual readers, as well as the general expectations for content, layout, and the format of academic discourse in their particular discipline.

Some researchers neglect to link their area of research interest to their problem statement when designing the research proposal (Simelane 2015).

According to Kate and Cadman (2002) in preparing one's research proposal, there are several easily neglected areas to which students need to pay attention during research design:

- Intellectual property rights;
- Authorship;
- Ethical clearance;
- Financial implications;
- Availability of data; and
- Access to data and materials.

Common mistakes in research design include failing to cast a broad-enough net within the scope of one's problems analysed - that is, not reviewing all of the important studies that relate to the problem set that one intends to solve. Boscolo, Arfe and Quarisa (2007) describe an intervention aimed at improving the quality writing beliefs about academic writing and discuss the effect on student ability to produce written syntheses of multiple sources.

Bruce (2006) argues that while students are still developing their own understanding of research problems literature is commonly seen as a written discussion of current theory and access to previous investigations. At the end students are trying to create a linear argument that takes the reader from knowing little about one's topic to a point where the reader wants to do the project more than anything in the world.

According to Martin and Fleming (2010) researchers should provide details of all data collection instruments used in their research, including sound and video recordings, literature reviews, questionnaires, interview schedules, observation techniques. Taş (2010) notes the importance of using clear,

understandable English, not only for grammatical discourse, but also reveal how these modes of discourse changed over time. She argues that academic writing is not merely a linguistic process, but also a socio-political process in which writers claim power during discourse.

## **Literature Review**

The following keywords have been extracted from the above general problem statement: quality, difficulties, research proposal, design, challenge and strategically research proposal were used to search for articles. Search resources such as Google, Google Scholar, Science Direct and Duckduckgo were utilised as search terms to identify problems that relate to the problem under investigation.

## **Common Mistakes**

According to Heath and Tynan (2010), the following common mistakes are made when designing a research proposal: Lack of ideas or too many ideas; Ideas that are not feasible to research or that will not add to existing knowledge; it may not be clear about what is the problem or issue to for research; it is not always clear about, about the rationale for the research; identification of the problem to research comes too late in the text as well as failure to identify key studies and concepts; insufficient explanation of the claims is made lack of integration of contributions on particular themes and lack of critical analysis; and use of other authors' ideas without proper references (plagiarism).

According Heath and Tynan (2010), the following mistakes a student make are: failure to provide the proper context to frame the research question; failure to delimit the boundary condition for the research, and other researcher failure to name landmark studies; failure to accurately present the theoretical and empirical contribution by other researchers; too much time reading before starting to write; failure to develop a coherent and persuasive argument for the proposed research, and too much detail on minor issues, but not enough detail on major issues.

Understanding the common mistake in design the research proposal can help the researcher to (Heath & Tynan 2010) critical or strategically eliminate his or her own mistake. This is to try and eliminate the mistake of

designing a quality research proposal. Swales and Feak (1994) state that academic writing for students is still consistently pragmatic in both the ways it can be used as a reader and in the way that lecturers can use it as a reference for teaching the micro and macro organisation of texts.

## **Introduction and Conclusion of the Proposal**

The importance of the proposal introduction is to show the audience where the project will sit within the broad picture of the subject and the discipline (Cadman 2002). It is important to place the study into context while addressing these issues. It could be of benefit if the student shows how s/he has collected theory (articles) and what the problem is that would be addressed. The strength of the proposal will be present in the presentation of the research question(s).

Parker and Steeves (2005) state that a proposal should start with a brief introduction, introducing the problem to be studied and an overview of the importance of the problem and then end the section with the specific aims. These aims are important and will help with setting the research questions and hypotheses (if any). Sharts-Hopko (2000) argues that a review of past issues will demonstrate the breadth of topics and that the design of a study should be an iterative one and not a linear one.

## **Research Methodology, Literature Review and Results**

The choice of methodologies is widening (Cadman 2002) and the students will improve their work the world of good by showing a research question and the link to the approach that will be used (Klopper & Lubbe 2011). The modern tendency is to concentrate on research questions. A research question is vital because there are approaches that can be taken that a vague question will mislead the methodology (Cadman 2002).

Each word written must be carefully considered because the proposal is a promise what the research will do (Parker & Steeves 2005). A section of the proposal called background and significance may be used to justify and explain the wording in the aims. The section should conclude with a statement explaining how the current gaps in the field could be filled. The entire proposal should reflect the specific aims. Also, the literature review should be critical showing the students included all relevant literature, critically reviewed it and synthesised the key studies (Parker & Steeves 2005). The student should

highlight any controversies. A stand should be taken on a well-stated rationale. The question has always been asked should students start with a theory and end with a theory. There is no standard answer to this.

Parker and Steeves (2005) state that the methods section depends on the work that the students had done previously. There should be an estimate of the sample size and whether the work will be empirical, quantitative. Fahy (2008) argues that the debate should be regarded as a formal method of taking a position and arguing what students want the people to believe. Heath and Tynan (2010) state that sometimes the literature review is incorporated into the introduction section. However, most academics prefer a separate section, which allow a more thorough review of the literature. The literature review serves several important functions: ensure that students are not reinventing the wheel, give credits to those who have laid the groundwork for the research, demonstrates the understanding of the research problem, demonstrates the understanding of the theoretical and research issues related to your research question, provide new theoretical insights or develop a new model as the conceptual framework for research. Bruce (2006) argues that a literature review is a long-standing tradition in research and scholarship. A literature review is used as a database report of primary or original scholarship and does not report new primary scholarship itself.

## **The Matrix Method of Literature Review and Research Phases Alignment**

Klopper and Lubbe (2012) propose that researchers could use two types of matrices as conceptual scaffolding at the beginning of a problem-solving research project when data-driven empirical solutions are sought to problems under investigation.

The first type of matrix is the problem-research question alignment matrix used to ensure that the sub-problems that are identified in problem statements are properly aligned with the research questions that the researcher poses and further develops in more detailed research questions in questionnaires or interview schedules to ensure viable empirical results.

The second type of matrix is the concept matrix used to present a concept-centric rather than an author-centric literature review, thereby ensuring that one's literature review does not become a subjective process of

stitching together a patchwork quilt of references, or the unilateral cherry picking of references that supports a preferred point of view. The use of matrices in research is innovative rather than novel, for matrix analysis integrates and align existing isolated methods proposed by other researchers into a single, powerful, integrated research methodology. By integrating separate methods into an integrated methodology researchers, particularly novice researchers are provided with powerful, practical tools to plan research, to obtain a prospective eagle's-eye perspective of the whole process from the research design phase to the final phase when researchers are able to evaluate the extent to which they have been able to solve the research problems that they have identified.

## **The Research Proposal**

### **The Uses of Research Proposals**

Heath and Tynan (2010) discuss the process of producing a research proposal and the sections appropriate for such a document. Additionally, they raise some questions that will help researchers to assess the quality of their proposals. They concluded by presenting a table summarising the main problems found in the various stages of developing a research proposal, and ways to deal with them.

Balakumar, Inamder and Jagadeesh (2013) argue that the purpose of a research proposal is to produce a template of common understanding from which tasks are allocated, divided and discussed by researchers, clinical staff and in some cases, research participants. The finished product is used to communicate intent to ethics committees and grant funding bodies before authorisation is granted and research funds are awarded. Denscombe (2013) states that research proposals have a well-established place in business and management education. At masters and doctoral level students either have to write research proposals research methods course, or in preparation for a dissertation or thesis to be earned by means of independent research.

### **The Step Model of The Research Proposal**

Martin and Fleming (2010) argue that constructing the proposal is a challenging process. It is, nevertheless, a critical part and should be given

careful consideration since it provides logic and structure to the envisaged study. A research proposal follows a set of sequential steps that provide structure to the prospective study. It is a written submission which spells out the design of the intended research project. An example of a generic template for writing a research proposal is presented.

Martin and Fleming (2010) argue that the successful research proposal should include the following steps which are given the research proposal a title, Provide relevant personal and professional details, Provide a short abstract or summary of around 300 words, Supply six keywords to describe the research proposal, Contrast an introduction that contains a rationale and relevant literature review, State the aim, research question, sub-questions and hypotheses or null hypotheses of the proposed research study, Outline the research methodology, Select setting, participants, sampling method, inclusion or exclusion criteria and method of recruitment, Describe data collection instrument, Detail intended data processing and analysis, Declare any ethical considerations and outline data protection procedures, Produce a timetable and consider potential problems, Estimate resources that may be required, Append relevant additional material and Append key references. Craig, Plume, McVeigh, Pringle and Amin (2007) emphasises the importance of open access (OA). This is taken broadly to mean that accessing, downloading, and reading material is free to the entire population of Internet users, several options for the provision of that access have emerged and it good initiative for designing the research proposal.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions were explored in this study because the literature did not solve the full problem statement:

1. What are the current challenges that researchers are faced with when it comes to drafting a good research proposal?
2. How does the researcher show the ability to formulate a research proposal?
3. What determine the quality of the good research proposal?

## **Research Plan and Methodology**

This study was quantitative in nature, and was conducted by means of a survey that made use of a structured questionnaire. The study may contain reference to a general objective to identify challenges when designing a quality research proposal. It will address issues to design a quality research proposal, and also the matrix that may be used to design a research proposal. This study therefore focused on collecting information that could be used.

## **Data Analysis**

The respondents for this study were the post graduate students in the Faculty of Commerce in the Departments of Business Management and Economics. The respondents were deemed representative of postgraduate students for the purpose of the study. The research used a random sampling method to analyse the critically challenge of research proposal. The population was 34. The data instrument that was used is a questionnaire that helped to collect primary data from the students. The questionnaire contained 5 sections.

## **Results and Evaluation**

The research questions used to collect the data are: What are the current challenges that researchers are faced with when it comes to drafting a good research proposal? How does the researcher show the ability to conduct the proposed research proposal? What determine the quality of the good research proposal? This research questions will be used to improve the level of designing the research proposal.

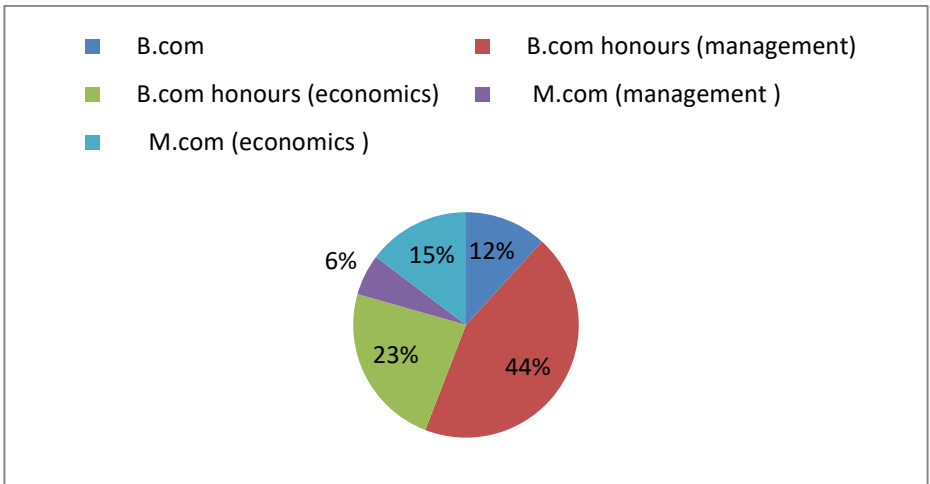
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## **Demographic Data**

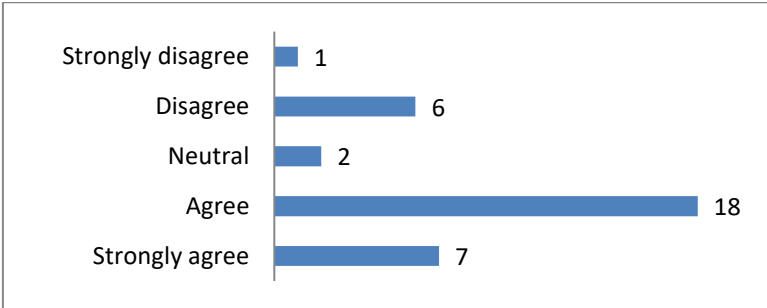
Eighty five percent of the sample falls in the age group 21 – 30 years and rest in the 12 % of the sample falls in the age group 30 – 40 years. This means that older students may be able to demonstrate a better approach to research because they should be able to motivate their arguments using experience they may have picked up previously. Most of the respondents were male (65%). This means that there are more male postgraduate students. Most of the respondents who are doing postgraduate studies at the Faculty of Commerce have been at university for 3- 6years. This shows that students will have experience about what system to use in their research.

Figure 1, on the next page, shows that the majority are doing B.Com Honours in Management (44 %) followed by B.Com Honours in Economics with 23 %. This means most of the respondents in this research come from Business Management. It is clear that a researcher in business management face challenges when it comes to designing a quality research proposal.



**Figure 1: Type of qualifications of the respondents.**

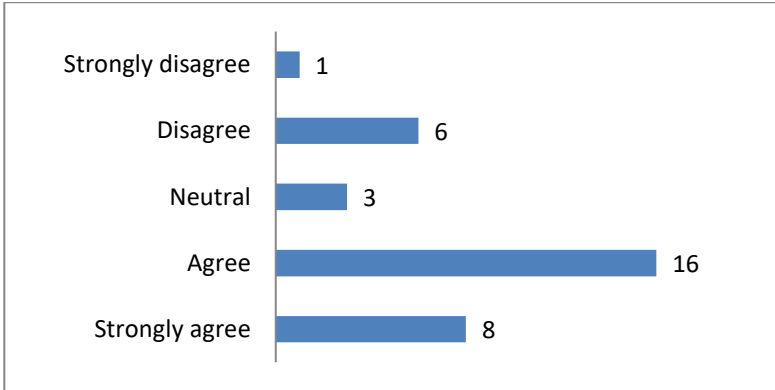
## **The Challenges that Researchers Face When Designing a Good Research Proposal**



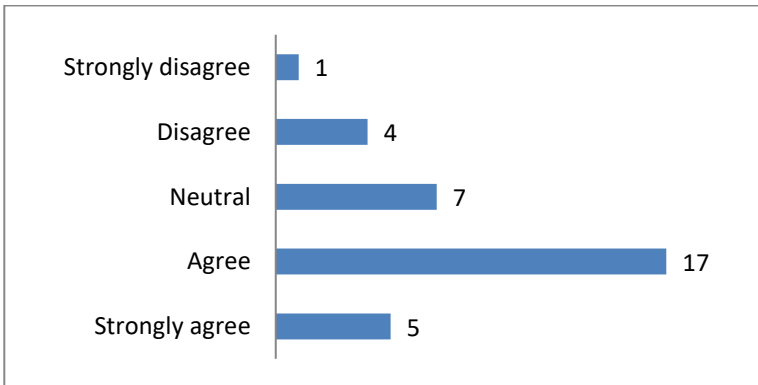
**Figure 2: Is the student able to design the problem statement at the Honours level**

Figure 2 shows that the majority of the respondents are facing challenges when designing their research proposals. One of the problems is gaining access to data sources using search engines such as Google, GoogleScholar, ScienceDirect, Duckduckgo. This result shows that some of the students face a problem of designing a proper problem statement. This means that supervisors could provide more assistance in writing a problem statement. Each word must be considered carefully because the proposal is a promise what the research will do (Parker & Steeves 2005).

Figure 3 shows that the majority of the respondents are facing the challenge of accessing research material in general. As a result designing the research proposal can be time consuming. This means that there should be enough time given to complete the research proposal. Developing an understanding of an issue, identifying, reading and summarising the relevant literature and developing the student's own perspective on the problem are time consuming. The researcher should have enough time to design a quality research proposal. According to Heath and Tynan (2010), too much time reading before starting to write, failure to develop a coherent and persuasive argument for the proposed research, and too much detail on minor issues, but not enough detail on major issues is a problem.

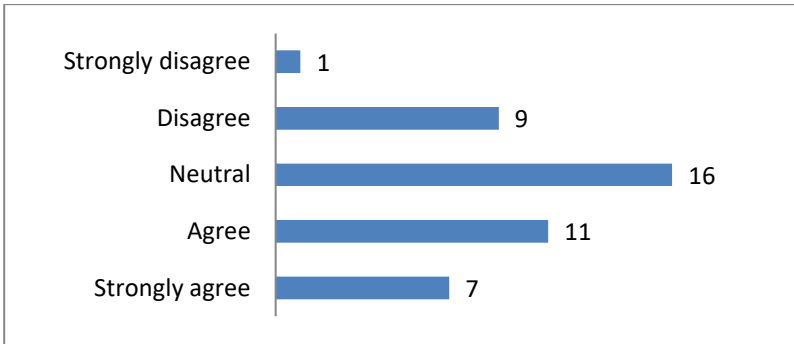


**Figure 3: Is the time frame to complete the research proposal appropriate?**



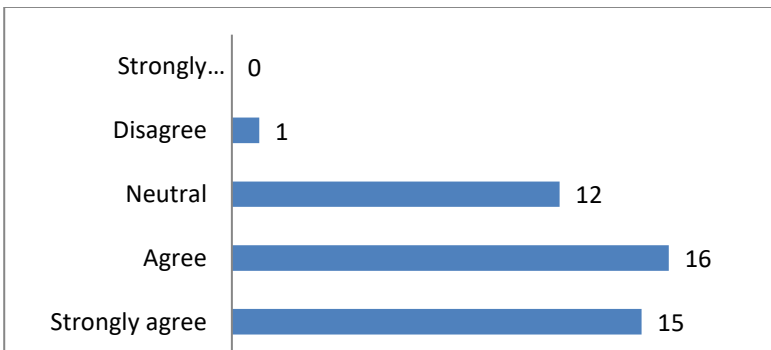
**Figure 4: The attitude researchers to designing a research proposal?**

Figure 4 demonstrates that the majority of the respondents have the right attitude to design the research proposal. Writing a research proposal is a source of anxiety where it can prevent the researcher to design a research proposal for students (Onwuegbuzie 1997). Students may feel lost in face of the novelty of the process, pressured by time restrictions and stressed by the forthcoming evaluation of their work. Under these circumstances the researcher may still have the attitude to do a research proposal.



**Figure 5: When designing a research proposal the student shows fear of application of research knowledge?**

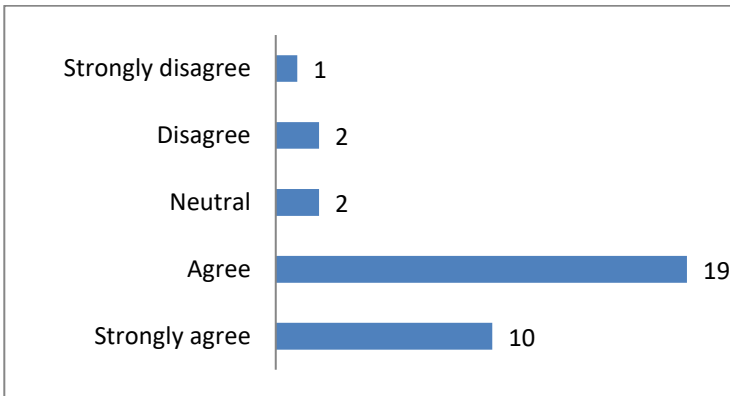
Figure 5 shows that the majority of the respondents have feared their application of research knowledge. The result was that some of the respondents disagree that researchers have the enthusiasm to design a research proposal. Students may fear research because they cannot work independently on a research proposal. Heath and Tynan (2010) argue that researchers fail to acknowledge landmark studies and the use of other authors' ideas without proper references (plagiarism).



**Figure 6: Do researchers prefer resources such as books, dissertations, journals, as source for a good research proposal.**

Figure 6 shows that the majority of the respondents agreed that quality research proposal depend on the initiative such as open access (OA). Furthermore, it was clear that good resources such as books, thesis and dissertation, journals, etc determine a good quality research proposal. This means that academic resources are helpful to the researchers and prove to be a mode to gain in-depth knowledge. This is essential because of the fact that case studies are available for students to base research on when it comes to an academic journal. As a researcher, students can make use of case studies to test a statement. An in-depth analysis can be reached with its help.

Heath and Tynan (2010) argue that to demonstrate the understanding of the research problem, researchers should demonstrate the understanding of the theoretical and research issues related to the research question. They can provide new theoretical insights or develop a new model as the conceptual framework for research. Academic journals also help researchers to exercise fluent writing. After all, as a student, one got their own thoughts and ideas to express and that can only find fruition when one has been given the scope to write freely.



**Figure 7: Have you considered the ethical implications of your study**

Figure 7 show that the majority of the respondents agreed that researchers should consider ethical implications while designing a quality research proposal. Atherton and Iain (2010) argue that important issues about how the process of applying for ethical permission should be viewed as more

than a bureaucratic exercise. The reality is that doing research ethically remains a challenge.

According to Sharts-Hopko (2000) in preparing the research proposal, there are several areas to which students fail to pay their attention to: Intellectual Property, Authorship, Ethical Clearance, Financial Implications, Availability of and Access to Data or Materials. Heath and Tynan (2010), argue that the literature review serves several important functions: ensure that students are not reinventing the wheel, give credit to those who have laid the groundwork for their research, demonstrates understanding of the research problem, demonstrate understanding of the theoretical and research issues related to the research question, provide new theoretical insights or develop a new model as the conceptual framework for the research.

### **Correlation Analysis**

After the empirical research was conducted, the correlation between research material and proposal is 0.565. This means that researchers are able to access study materials through academics sites like Google Scholar. As a result students are able to write research papers. By using academic sites students can access academic journals and other similar material also giving them the scope to exercise fluent writing. According to Cadman (2002), an academic journal also helps with the scope to exercise better writing in a research proposal to place the study into context while addressing issues.

The correlation between the ethics and research proposal show 0.419, a positive association. Because this indicates that students understand the importance that they should apply ethical implications when designing the research proposal. Ethical implications involve a great deal of cooperation and coordination among many different people in different disciplines of study and institutions. Ethical standards promote the values of the research proposal and if no ethical implications are considered then it can lead to problems when doing the research proposal.

### **Regression Analysis**

The regression between these variables is between 0.279, this means that re-

searchers experience challenges to state the area of interest on the problem statement and to develop the idea. Bruce (2006) argues that developing an understanding of an issue, identify, reading and summarising the relevant literature, and developing an own impression of the problem are time consuming and often a frustrating process. The regression between two other variables is 0.248, this means that the time frame of the research proposal is not appropriate to some researchers. This is because designing the research proposal is time consuming and it requires some processes to complete the study. Developing the idea is time consuming because some of the researchers have ideas to apply the idea on the research proposal. It is also important to know where ideas come from and how do you know if this idea is useful (Sharts-Hopko 2000). The regression between the variables the researcher is satisfied with resources such as books, dissertations, journals, etc. and the used sources for the research proposal are 0.933. This means that the resources are useful.

## **Answering Research Questions in Terms of Collected Data**

### ***What are the current challenges that researchers face when it comes to designing a good research proposal?***

Researchers face the challenges of choosing the right topic for their research proposal; the topic should hold interest for the research proposal and the context of the research. This study shows that researchers face the challenges of designing a research proposal; some of the challenges are limited access to a computer laboratory to access the online academic journals. Common mistakes in this part of the proposal include failing to cast a broad-enough net, that is, not reviewing all of the important studies. Tynan and Heath (2010) a good research proposal should persuade its readers that there is an issue worthy of research and that the researcher is sufficiently familiar with the key existing literature to do so in a meaningful way.

The critical challenges faced by the researcher when designing the researcher proposal is that some of the researchers are unable to design a problem statement at the postgraduate level. It also entail issues such as: logic of argument, well focused research questions, reading as wide and as deep as possible (theoretical framework), feasibility, critical approach to literature, understanding of current issues, aligning methodology to literature, problem

statement and research questions, accuracy of English and attention to practical issues.

Sharts-Hopko (2000) states that it is also important to know where ideas come from and to be able to generate ideas when writing the research proposal. Generating ideas can be helpful to understand what the writer is writing about, when generating ideas can be helpful to design the research proposal. Heath and Tynan (2010) state that the following mistakes are made when designing research proposal: Lack of ideas (or too many ideas); Ideas not feasible to research or that will not add to existing knowledge; Not clear or not explicit about what the major problem or issue to research is; Not clear, or not explicit about what the rationale for the research is; Failure to identify key studies and concepts; and Insufficient explanation of the claims made.

### ***How does the researcher show the ability to conduct the proposed research proposal?***

Successful researchers are known for their productivity, their ability to focus, and their ability to work very hard on their studies after the empirical investigation on the research. When researchers like what they do, and if researchers have the ability and enthusiasm to do the research and to work hard surely writers will get excellent result on the studies. Researchers show the ability to construct a research proposal by working independently on the research proposal. Even though researchers experience the challenges and anxiety to design the researcher proposal they are determined to design a quality research proposal.

Most of the researchers have the ability to construct the research proposal because the results show that the majority of the respondents agree that researchers having right attitude to design the project. Writing a research proposal is a source of anxiety for students that may restrict the researchers to design a research proposal.

Onwuegbuzie (1997) argues that students may feel lost in face of the novelty of the process, pressured by time restrictions and stressed by the forthcoming evaluation of their work. Under the circumstances of time restriction and the forthcoming evaluation of work the researcher should have the right attitude to do a research proposal. According to Balakumar *et al.* (2013), anxiety is a situation-specific, negative feeling or emotional dispo-



sition. This occurs when a student is in a library setting. Symptoms include confusion, uncertainty fear, tension, helplessness, and intrusive worries which impede information seeking (Balakumar *et al.* 2013).

Even though some of the researchers experience challenges of the anxiety writes are still able to show the right ability to do the research proposal by working hard on the research project that they are assigned to accomplish. Working hard is determined by having enough resources, having the right ability to do the study and having the right attitude to work close with the supervisor of the research proposal.

### ***What determines the quality of the good research proposal?***

A quality research proposal is determined by academic references to acknowledge somebody else's work done. Turning an idea into a well thought-out research proposal requires a number of tasks and usually calls for diverse skills such as considering the ethical implication on the research, and applying research material such as books, etc. that can lead to generate an idea in order to design the quality research proposal.

A quality research proposal is to have enough resources that will assist the researcher to design a quality research proposal, some of the useful initiatives is design for search of the information in the Internet, According to Cadman (2002) in preparing the research proposal, there are several areas to which a student's fail to pay attention to: Intellectual Property, Authorship, Ethical Clearance, Financial Implications, Availability of and Access to Data or Materials. Both historical and the current studies should be considered and need to be addressed as such, that is, a student should present the historical studies as background and show how their premises have been substantiated or revised with more current research (Boscolo, Arfe & Quarisa 2007). Analysing historical and current studies will help the researchers to analyse the literature properly.

### **Recommendations**

Klopper and Lubbe (2012) state that to start analysing the context for a postgraduate proposal, the researcher needs to keep in mind questions about

the audience members' knowledge, values, and needs; expectations for content, layout, and format; and the circumstances in which they will encounter a proposal. The proposal writer should also answer questions about the purpose for doing this research. By considering these questions, the proposal writer analyse the context for the proposal and establish a basis for making wise decisions about what to say and how to say it (Simelane 2015).

The university should hire more postgraduate students doing masters and doctoral degrees as research assistance to assist students when writing a research proposal. This is to minimise the broad challenges facing the researcher during the course of study. In order for the Honours students to Bruce (2006) argues that the literature review is seen as a written discussion of the theory drawing on investigations previously. This is undertaken to develop an understanding of an issue, identify, reading and summarising the relevant literature, and developing their own take on the problem are time consuming and often a frustrating process.

Researchers should design the introduction strategically in order to give a brief explanation or summary of the document. It may also explain certain elements that are important to the essay if explanations are not part of the main text. Parker and Steeves (2005) state that the proposal should start with a brief introduction, introducing the problem to be studied and an overview of the importance of the problem and then end the section with the specific aims. Some of the students at the experience the challenge of language use when writing the research proposal. They should attend extra classes that will assist the students with English to write an effective research proposal (Simelane 2015).

The proposal writer should have some general strategies but there should also be specific strategies. The different sections should be written keeping these strategies in mind. The literature review should show the importance of the research area. Parker and Steeves (2005) note that there is always the problem of finding the right balance between critique and acceptance.

The university should have support offices for every department to assist honours students in terms of how about to generate the ideas when designing a research proposal. The fundamental starting idea would be a clearly formulated problem statement. In most cases these will help with the formulation of a specific research question. It also therefore limits the creation of an expected questionnaire by many of these institutions. The other problem

would be to expect proposal writers to specify in advance likely results and actions that could help with this (Disney 2001).

## **Conclusion**

This study may help to improve the level of a quality research proposal, the study also identifies the critical challenge when drafting a research proposal. Heath and Tynan (2010) state that the importance of a quality research proposal is increased further when it is used to seek funding for one's project to apply for a scholarship. According to Heath and Tynan (2010) to write a good research proposal is a demanding task and requires high calibre writing skill, organisation, and the intellectual capacity to critically to analyse and evaluate research, both other people and one's own.

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