

Effective Research Thesis and Proposal Writing
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Abstract

Admission into a higher degree research program or confirmation of candidature into such a program of most universities often requires the applicant to submit a research proposal. This is a very important document which not only articulates the research topic and research question, but also explains the research design which outlines how the proposed research will be carried out. The significance of the research proposal is highlighted by the fact that failure to write a good research proposal may mean failure to be admitted into a higher degree research program, or failure to be confirmed as a continuing doctoral candidate. In spite of such significance, however, my experience when supervising many higher degree research students is that many of them struggle to write a good research proposal. One of the contributing factors to this is the apparent void that exists in research methods textbooks on exactly what a research proposal is and how it should be written. This paper aims to help fill that void by articulating a detailed structure of a research proposal that could be used as part of the application to gain admission into a higher degree research program of any good university or for confirmation of candidature in such a research study program. The paper draws on the expertise accumulated on this topic as a result of many decades of writing research proposals for higher degree research projects, conducting many higher degree research studies successfully in several universities in Australia and other countries, teaching research methods to higher degree research students and supervising many successful masters and doctoral theses.

Keywords: Higher degree, Proposal, Research and education

1. Introduction

1.1 Personal Reflections on Conducting Higher Degree Research Most scholarly papers that contain a reflective section usually place it towards the end of the paper. However, I have decided to start with it here so as to give the reader, right at the start, an understanding of how my personal involvement in higher degree research (HDR) has shaped my world view about how an effective research proposal for the award of a higher degree should be written. By higher degree I refer to second tier and third tier degrees.

In Bachelors' degrees are in the first tier, masters' degrees belong to the second tier and doctoral degrees are located in the third tier. These classifications might differ across different educational jurisdictions and institutions, but in Australian universities these classifications are the norm, and

in education in particular, the doctoral classification tier comprises the EdD (Doctor of Education) and the PhD (Doctor of Philosophy).

The research proposal was for the HDR project entitled the Economics of Cattle and Beef Marketing in Nigeria. The central focus of the thesis was an investigation into the factors that influenced the demand and supply for beef throughout Nigeria. A major part of the thesis was the estimation of what in economics and econometrics is called the income elasticity of demand (Draper & Smith, 1966) for Nigerian beef.

It is this personal and professional immersion in HDR projects over many years that has given me the understanding that it is not easy to write a good research proposal for a HDR project, and that in fact many students struggle to complete this task. This understanding, I believe informs my understanding of how to write a good research proposal for a HDR project, especially in higher education, which I believe when shared through this highly ranked international journal, could help people intending to undertake HDR at either masters or doctoral level, write an effective research proposal that would facilitate their admission into any university of their choice, and subsequently enable them to conduct a successful research project leading to the award of a higher degree. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to help the reader understand four things about research proposals for HDR. Firstly, what do we mean by a HDR proposal? Secondly, what purposes does it serve the student and the university? Thirdly, what does a good HDR research proposal look like? And finally, what precautionary measures should you take to enhance your chances of writing a research proposal that will be accepted for a HDR project leading to the fulfillment for the award of a degree at masters or doctoral level?

2. What is a Higher Degree Research Proposal?

A higher degree research proposal (RP) is a document that provides information to others about the project you propose to undertake as part of your study for a higher degree (Dunleavy, 2003). Many universities require all applicants for admission into Higher Degree Research (e.g: Masters, EdD and PhD) to include a RP with their application. This is an abridged version and is expected to be between 3 – 5 pages. Following admission, the student is usually put on a probationary period of up to six months, during which s/he works on his or her initial RP and develops it into a detailed RP which they then present to a panel of experts, which uses that RP as the basis for the confirmation of candidature (COC) into a higher degree. This is usually a very comprehensive document and may vary in length between 30 – 50 pages.

So, you can see there is great variance in length but I hope you can also see from this description of the RP, that it is one of the key documents that support your application for admission, and also your most important document to secure and confirm your candidature in a HDR program. It is therefore a very important document, and needs to be approached very carefully. If a RP is rejected, your admission into a HDR program cannot proceed.

What Purposes Does the Research Proposal Serve?

In a nutshell, the RP informs others about exactly what you want to do your research on, why it is important to do it, how you will do it, any ethical issues you might need to address, the resources you will need, how long it will take you, and how you will finance it. Its specific purposes are: To meet the requirements for your admission into a HDR program. To have your candidature confirmed for HDR study. To articulate your research topic. To define your research question and explain how you will go about answering it. To provide an outline for your dissertation. To gain attention and interest of academics who might be your supervisors.

What Does a Good HDR Research Proposal Look Like?

There is no one way a RP must be structured. However, the RPs that usually succeed first time at the COC follow a structure similar to the one I propose below. You are of course welcome to vary it according to your understanding of what you want to do, or what your university prescribes.

Introduction

This should be a very brief, and clear statement of what your RP is about, the general area in which it is located, the specific area of your interest, why that area is your focus (e.g. a gap in knowledge), the research question you will ask to help fill that gap, why it is important to fill that gap, the aims you hope to achieve, and a statement of your tentative argument (the thesis), about filling that gap. This introduction should serve as a comprehensive summary of your RP, which is so worded that it would make sense to a reader who is not a specialist in your proposed field of research.

Identification and Articulation of a Researchable Topic

A good way to start thinking about how you will go about identifying your research topic is to remember what research is. Re-search, simply means, looking and looking again; searching and searching again (Burns, 2000). So, now you ask yourself, what sorts of things, objects, ideas, or people might I want to look at again and again? The answer is inevitably going to be that it will be objects, ideas or people that interest you. Objects, ideas or people, you want to be associated with. Therefore, the first step in identifying your research topic is to ask yourself what interests

you about what you might research into. The best way to do this is to sit back, relax, and brainstorm yourself about what interests you in education such that you might be interested in conducting an investigation into it?

Description of Background, Context and Statement of the Problem to be Investigated

Here you explain your answers to these questions: What is already known about your topic? What is missing? What more is needed? Is there a problem? Why does this problem exist?

Statement of the Significance of the Study

To be able to state the significance of the study you propose to undertake, you should ask yourself the following questions, and use the answers to explain the importance of your research and to justify why it is worth doing: Why is it important that the problem I have identified be investigated? What contribution will the investigation make? To whom? How? Why? How original is this contribution to the discipline? Why is this research worth pursuing? What is the theoretical and practical importance of the outcomes of my research? Which research issues are evident in the relevant literature? How will my research address these issues? What are the expected outcomes and why are they important? Who will benefit? How? Why? How does my research link with what has been done in this field? How can my research complement what is happening in this area? Is there some way I can use my research to extend an existing model or way of thinking or analysis? What really justifies my research?

Scope, Aims and Objectives of the Study

It is very easy for students and early career researchers to be over ambitious regarding how much they want to achieve as the outcome of their research. It is important for you to recognize that your research is not intended to provide solutions to every problem you can think of in education, or in your specific subject or field. Your RP is being submitted for an academic purpose, namely to get you into a university or help you to earn a degree. So, you should state its scope, aims and objectives that are realistically achievable (Burns, 2000). State exactly what you want to learn as a result of conducting your proposed research. These questions should help you complete this part of your RP:

Review of Literature Informing the Study

The literature review is intended to demonstrate to whoever will read your RP that you have a good grasp on the literature in the field of your proposed research, that you can use it well in your research, and you can contribute to it (Cohen & Manion, 1995). It offers greater contextualization of your study based on what others have done in your area of proposed research. Again, I find that if students ask themselves the following questions; the answers help them to carry out a comprehensive literature review that satisfies supervisors and examiners.

Research Question/s to be Investigated

A good starting point in formulating the research question (RQ) for your RP is to ask the simple question: What is a research question? In HDR research proposals (See for example, Schwab, 2005), a RQ is not just a question about your research. It has a special meaning and carries a lot of weight as you can see in this definition, and explanation. A research question is that cardinal question which centers our research efforts and focuses them on mounting a scholarly argument that helps us to solve the problem identified as important for our research (Cohen & Maldonado, 2007).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework (TF) articulates the theoretical views expressed by leaders in the field into which you plan to research (Scott & Usher, 2004). Ideally, the TF should emerge from your literature review. A good TF usually contains a model that you will use to analyze and make sense of your data. Students will often say, my research is on a new topic and there is no theory already developed in this area. This is usually an indication that their literature review has either been superficial, or not broad and deep enough, or they are unable to connect the dots in the literature that would enable them to come up with a TF. I argue that trying to conduct a HDR project without grounding it in a well-articulated TF is like trying to erect a building on shifting sand. Such a building would have no foundation.

Methodology

In HDR terminology, methodology is the way the entire research project is designed and conducted (Scott and Usher, 1996). It addresses the question: How will you approach the research, design and conduct it so as to be able to answer the RQs? Unpacking this global

question, leads to asking the following specific questions: In which Paradigm will you locate your research? Will it be the positivist, interpretivist, critical or the pragmatic? A good discussion of the different paradigms is available in good research methods textbooks and publications such as Guba (1992), Patton (1988) Burns (2000), Cohen and Manion (1995).

Budget and Other Resources Required

This is where you prioritize the different activities of your research project and allocate the amount of money available to you to each, accordingly. You need to ask yourself the following questions: Will I need to travel to meet with my supervisors during my RP preparation? Will I be staying overnight and therefore needing hotel accommodation? Will I need to purchase any research materials, such as published reports?

| Step ID | Research step | What I will do Briefly indicate exactly what you will do | Timing/When |
|----------------|--|---|--------------------|
| 1 | Introduction | | Jan |
| 2 | Defining Research Topic | | Jan and Feb |
| 3 | Background, Context and Problem Articulation | | Feb |
| 4 | Significance of the study | | Feb |
| 5 | Scope, aims and objectives | | Feb |
| 6 | Literature Review | | March |
| 7 | Research Question | | Feb and March |
| 8 | Theoretical Framework | | April |
| 9 | Methodology | | April |
| 10 | Research Plan and Time-frame | | May |
| 11 | Budget | | May |
| 12 | Thesis Plan | | May |
| 13 | References | | Jan - May |

As you can see in the Table, developing a good research proposal is likely to take you about six months. In many Universities, this is the period allowed for your probationary doctoral candidature. After the six months, you are required to present your detailed RP which is used for the confirmation of your candidature (or not). So, as you look at the structure of this Table, consider carefully how much time your university allows you to prepare your final RP. Each of the steps of the RP requires a reasonable amount of time, and setting them out as illustrated above should help to ask yourself the following questions: How much time does the university allow me to develop my RP? Realistically, given my personal circumstances (work, family, travel, health, relationships, other), when can I start and when will I finish? What other deadlines do I have to meet during this period? Which are the different stages of my RP development that I will need to develop? Have I allowed for time to discuss the development of my RP with my supervisors? Have I allowed realistic timing for each step? How will I say that I am making good progress?

Budget and Other Resources Required

This is where you prioritize the different activities of your research project and allocate the amount of money available to you to each, accordingly. You need to ask yourself the following questions: Will I need to travel to meet with my supervisors during my RP preparation? Will I be

staying overnight and therefore needing hotel accommodation? Will I need to purchase any research materials, such as published reports? Will I need a new computer or new software? Will there be printing costs? What other costs involved? Have I made arrangements to meet all those costs? Which other resources or services will I need? E.g. Transcription, programs? training?

Thesis Plan

This is a very tentative indication of the proposed structure for your thesis. It is a good idea to show that you have thought about this, but do not spend much effort on this activity, since your thesis plan will most likely change many times as you develop your thesis. The plan should at least indicate the sequence of the proposed chapters for the whole thesis, and possibly how many words in each chapter. The total number of words for a Master's degree is about 60,000 – 70,000 words. For a PhD this varies in the range 80,000 – 100,000 (Dunleavy, 2003). There is great variance in these numbers and so you should discuss these with your supervisors. I use the metaphor of a plateau when advising my doctoral students on the word limits in each chapter. I refer to the first two or three chapters as climbing up the gentle slope of a plateau. So, these chapters increase in word limits in the upward order of 7,000, 8,000, 9,000. The next three chapters sit on top of the plateau, so they each have an equal number of words, say, 10,000, 10,000, and 10,000. The last three chapters descend from the plateau with a decreasing number of words such as, 9,000, 8,000, and 7,000. Assuming your doctoral thesis has nine chapters worded as per my plateau, you would end up with a thesis of 78,000 words. By the time you include the preliminary leading pages, plus references and appendices, you are likely to end up with a document about 100,000 words all up.

List of References

These must be compiled following the APA Styles manual (APA, 2012). Your reference list is not a bibliography. Therefore, you should include in it, only those publications you have cited in the different parts of your RP, not everything you have read. What Precautionary Measures Should You Take to Enhance Success of Your Research Proposal? In HDR studies the RP plays a very important part in getting one admitted into a university and subsequently in designing a research project that will lead to a successful authoring of a higher degree thesis (Dunleavy, 2003). In most universities, there is a big difference between your initial RP that you attach to your application for admission into a HDR and the final RP that you submit for your COC. The former, as said earlier, is a short (no more than 5 pages) document articulating exactly what you want to research into and how you intend to go about it. It is rather limited in breadth and depth. The latter, however, is a much more detailed and deeper analytical document that gets you to be accepted as a doctoral student or not. A weak initial RP could get you admitted but a weak final RP will not get you confirmed as a doctoral candidate. This can be cause for serious frustration and disappointment. One way to ensure that this does not happen is to work with your supervisors, and draw upon their considerable expertise to help you write a comprehensive RP.

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