

# Synopsis Writing Skills of Students at Public-Private Universities of Karachi: A Supervisors' Perspective

Tahir Iqbal<sup>1</sup>, Mukesh Kumar Khatwani<sup>1\*</sup> and Ishrat Afshan Abbasi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Area Study Centre, Far East & Southeast Asia, University of Sindh, Jamshoro

<sup>2</sup>Department of International Relations, University of Sindh, Jamshoro; mukesh.khatwani@usindh.edu.pk

## Abstract

**Objective:** The study attempts to explore the perception and understanding of research supervisors regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the novice researchers in terms of developing a concise but effectively motivating research proposal.

**Method:** This is a pure qualitative research, employing the thematic analysis approach, critically analyses the emerging themes and sub-themes from in-depth interviews. The findings of this research are based on 18 in-depth interviews conducted from guides/supervisors of 6 public universities and private degree awarding institutes in Karachi. **Findings:** The overall findings reveal that these novice researchers prefer supervisor's suggested topic and possible research questions/objectives for research instead of identifying a research gap/problem and then discussing with possible research guide. Majority of students select research topic without a substantial literature review, hence, the problem statements in the most of research synopses do not address the gaps in the literature. **Improvements:** The study strongly recommends that a systematic mechanism of training on research skills and various analytical instruments/software (i.e. SPSS, NVIVO) must be ensured in the universities. Besides, there must be a quarterly review of the students and they should be inquired about the required assistance for completing their research work.

**Keywords:** Novice Researcher, Perception, Proposal Writing Skills, Thematic Analysis Understanding

## 1. Introduction

Research is defined as premeditated investigation to explore a problem and to suggest solutions to the identified problem by applying scientific methods (quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods), thus, a research creates second (new) knowledge<sup>1,2</sup>. This is why it is argued that research should contribute original and novel knowledge to the existing body of knowledge in the relevant field<sup>3</sup>. The newly generated knowledge should be useable, reusable, challengeable, persuasive, and arguable by other researchers. A piece of exploration to qualify as a research must be selected from the area of interest and it should traverse a set of rigorous examination such as validity, reliability and unbiased conclusion. Thereby, a PhD research proposal (synopsis) must meet the criteria of a scientific research. The research proposal is designed on a chosen research topic but the topic is to come from

a researcher's area of interest<sup>4</sup>. Research proposal is a concrete and appealing framework for M.Phil./PhD thesis, which should define the originality and novelty of a research problem along-with an illustration about the critical thinking and approach. Thus, a research proposal not only attempts to bridge the gaps in the existing knowledge, but also contributes to the existing intellectual knowledge.

The main role of research supervision is to achieve quality and completion of students' research work in time<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, it is argued that supervisors' role is mentoring to enhance critical, analytical and creative potential of novice researchers and enable them to expand their academic excellence in research to inculcate confidence and proficiency<sup>6</sup>. Research students who are lacking targeted efforts, which are highly significant for research, perceive research guides a triggering factor of their work and expect more assistance from them. Research students

develop an idea that the supervisor should 'hold their hand' and actively direct them to complete their work. Practically, the task of a guide is giving a blue print on how to review and analyze the relevant literature, developing contextual or theoretical framework, and applying appropriate research design for conducting the research<sup>7,8</sup>.

Social scientists are of the opinion that the major problem faced by novice researchers is 'selection of topic' and secondly 'lack of interest in selected topic'<sup>9,10</sup>. According to research studies 71% of the selected research topics were found very broad, misleading, irrelevant and lacking clarity and consistency. Most of the time supervisors assign students research topics beyond their interest ground, which creates a big challenge for students to boost up motivation and enhance the background information about it<sup>11</sup>. Profoundly, research in academia is to extend the boundary of knowledge and provide the solution and, in doing so, historical evolution is main function and considered as a core value of the institutes. At the initial phase of selecting a research topic students should attempt to formulate a tentative list of research topics and should choose the most motivational theme out of the list, which probably meets their interest and career aspirations. Doing so, students need to review literature and discuss with their research fellows. It is an admitted fact that this method of topic selection requires a lot of readings and discussion sessions with supervisor as well research fellows.

The introductory section of most of research proposals by novice researchers has been observed containing irrelevant information and outdated references along with slack and informal writing style. Statement of the problem aims to expose the fact that how the raised questions about that specific problem are going to fill a gap in the existing knowledge and why does the problem need a serious attention. An inclusive problem statement consists of just a line or two about the issue and the rest of the paragraph(s) includes explanation and interpretation of the posed problem/issue. Mostly, research proposals fail to develop a coherent and persuasive argument for the proposed research study and a lack of proper context to frame the problem statement. In some cases, it has been found that the problem statements are not relevant to the given background and context<sup>12,13</sup>.

Developing the research question (s) is very important in research study, which guide(s) a searcher to find answers to the questions raised in a proposed study. As research questions are the most imperative element of

a research proposal, therefore, they need to be concise, relevant, arguable and focused. Smart research questions are the spine of proposal<sup>14</sup>. Research questions in most research proposals are vague and in some cases, even research questions do not look like research questions. Furthermore, the research proposal lacks applicable in-text citations concerning accurate theoretical framework and empirical contributions of previous researchers. Thus, they cannot produce a systematic review and neglect constructing a link between literature review and the proposed study. By reason of such basic flaws, the research proposal by a novice researcher supports the arguments and propositions of the previous literature, while the arguments and opinion of the researcher are missing.

Generally, it is challenging for a novice students to plan an appropriate methodology for the proposed research study. Having no understanding of the basic ideas about research methodology and research design as well as structuring unclear targeted population and unexplained sampling size in the research proposal mislead the entire research process. Literature regarding the phase of data analysis in a research study of novice researchers/students highlights some key deficiencies in their work such as, they use vague and inappropriate techniques. The major problem with data analysis is that research students employ misappropriate techniques, therefore, their work does not present supporting references from the past studies.

Since the establishment of Higher Education Commission (HEC), Pakistan practices of research in public and private universities have increased considerably, and a huge number of fresh graduates are seeking admission in advanced research programmes (M.Phil./PhD). Most novice researchers do not have an understanding of research proposal and its importance in academia. The eminence of a research project depends on the feature and excellence of research proposal. In essence, a research proposal intends to appeal and convince supervisor and research committee that a student has capability for producing a valuable research in consort with workplan. Furthermore, the preliminary reading makes the potential novice researchers familiarise with the subject area and help them to comprehend the scope and complexities of research. This study intends to explore that how does a research supervisor observe and perceive the skills and capabilities of a novice researcher for developing a coherent research proposal? Additionally, this

paper aims to ascertain the M.Phil. and Ph.D. supervisors' perspective about students' research proposal writing skills; and to help the research students make their proposal appropriate and acceptable before the research committee. Consistent with these objectives, this paper presents a critical discussion and analysis on the role of research guide; selection of research topic; developing research statement, objectives/questions; presenting context to the study; reviewing relevant literature; developing conceptual and theoretical frameworks; and selection of appropriate research methodology.

## 2. Research Methodology

This research is a qualitative in its nature and is conducted in the HEC of Pakistan recognized universities and degree awarding institutes in Karachi, Sindh. Purposive sampling technique has been used because it was to ensure that the respondents meet the required criteria. The required criteria for the respondents of this study were: respondent must be permanent faculty member; s/he must be holding PhD degree and must be supervising M.Phil./PhD candidates. Six degree awarding institutes and universities were selected and 18 In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) were conducted with respondents at their concerned offices. The participants possessed rich experience of research and teaching at post-graduate level. The interview schedule for data collection was based on open ended questions derived out of the literature review. The average interview time span ranged from 40 to 60 minutes. Notes taking technique was also used to record data on notebook. The data was transcribed and later thematic analysis technique was used for data analysis. In order to follow the research ethics and ensuring the confidentiality, we sought the consent of the research participants on prescribed form and ensured them to keep their identification strictly confidential.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

### 3.1 Mentorship and Students' Expectation

Generally, supervisors (research participants in this study) think that the purpose of M.Phil./PhD degree to research students is getting promotion and professional success and career building. They are also of the view that students carry research for degree requirement and getting a good job. However, in opinion of research

supervisors, the research aims must be to help industry, organization, society and government by exploring problems and providing workable and acceptable solutions to these problems. Unfortunately, this practice could not be materialized and encouraged in the Pakistani universities. Moreover, the purpose of these research degrees is to develop research skills of concerned students so that they can contribute and add value through research not only in their professional careers but also for the betterment of industry and economy as the whole. This view is also endorsed by Bowden, et al who think research in academia is to extend the boundary of knowledge and provide the solution also believe that students only intended to complete their PhD dissertations for getting promotion or a good job. According to findings of this study, the role of supervisor is to guide and evaluate the student's performance, while students expect more than that. The similar findings were also highlighted who found that the main role of research supervision is to achieve quality and completion of students' research works. This study corroborating with the research suggests that supervisor's role as a mentor is to make students learn the research skills, knowledge creation, enhance critical thinking and see the problem through different perspectives.

### 3.2 Selecting Wide-ranging Fancy Research Topic

Most of the research supervisors view that students face difficulty in selection of research topic. This is always a challenging and one of the difficult aspects and generally all students struggle to select their research topics. Similarly, study conducted found that selection of research topic was the difficult task for research students. The findings of this study reveal that generally lack of study and interaction with the concerned experts are common problems in this context. Moreover, participants have emphasized that research students could not express what they think because of poor write-up skills and language barriers (English as the second language). Instead of extensive literature review for the purpose of topic selection they randomly share and discuss topics. Selection of topic demands a lot intellectual efforts whereas students do not bother to critically read research articles or books. They hear the floating topic and then make it their own. They do not think as the researchers, they think like an ordinary persons. To think like a researcher needs time energy and efforts.

Another concern raised by the research participants is that research students tend to select a fancy topic, whether it is a researchable or not. Sometime media reports or newspapers information are the source for selection of research topic. Sometime students link the already done research topic with one of their interest in the local context, mostly in this way, ideas and research population do not match because the problem does not exist in the local context, the culture, and norms, infrastructure, and already available information and literature do not endorse the topic. Similar point is also revealed who thinks that a student chooses interesting topic which probably meet his/her career aspirations. If the student is doing so, s/he needs to discuss with senior research students.

### 3.3 Unjustified Research Statement and Ambiguous Research Objectives/Questions

The findings of the study have concluded that most of students do not justify research problem statements in the context of previous literature. It is one of the weakest areas of students in writing a research proposal. The findings of the current study reveal that majority of research students could not present a comprehensive problem statement which considered being the foundation of the research. Most of the research/problem statements in proposed research do not demonstrate what actual problem is and what researcher is going to address in the proposed study. The findings of the current study reveal that the problem statement does not look a problem statement but looks an ordinary statement. It does not have any intensity and does not mark the magnitude of the problem. Research problem generates research goals, objectives and hypothesis. Mostly students mix up problem statement and research gaps. Students do not completely identify the gaps in their research statements while a research study primarily aims at identifying and filling a gap in the existing knowledge that needs a serious attention.

Further, findings of the study reveal that majority of the research participants agree upon that research students are witnessed confused in developing the comprehensive research question(s)/objectives and hypotheses of the proposed research study. The stated objectives seem to be unrealistic and unachievable. The objectives do not explain what research students want to do. The implication of research also seems to be missing. It was observed by the most of research supervisors that the actual research question (s) is/are missing in the proposed research study.

The questions given in research proposal look like ordinary questions rather than comprehensive research questions. Mostly the relationship between objectives and research questions is missing in synopsis, and hypotheses look like a simple statement rather than presenting an assumption developed from previous literature and linked to the proposed research.

### 3.4 Lacking Harmonization between Research Objectives and Background

According to the findings of the study, research students need to relate the background of the study to the selected topic of the research. The background of the study is like a foundation for generating the main argument for study to be carried out. The findings reveal that background is like a sketch and brief illustration of a research topic, however, ignoring the significance of this, students start proposal write-up underlining general and unnecessary discussion. Following this pattern of proposal write-up is always difficult because this is not only first write-up of students but also it is going to set the tone of the thesis. Supervisors also view that background to the study shows how a researcher drives readers to the research problem.

The findings also reveal that background to the study must be endorsed by relevant literature review. In other words, literature review is an explanation and detail to the background or context to the study. Students cannot create coordination in the background and the hypotheses of the study; they state something in background and use different variables in hypothesis and highlight diverse evidences. Historical facts and contextual information need to be given in background with ensuring coherence and consistency. Similarly, find that most often mistake in research proposal 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.

### 3.5 Lacking Critical Assessment of Relevant Literature

The literature review must highlight that the proposed research is a novel work and it has never been done, it is known as highlighting the research gap. The gap may be related to any geographical locations where such kind of study has not been carried out and it can be comparative study. In literature review section, research students present others' works and ideas as their own, which falls in the category of plagiarism. Moreover, novice researchers

fail to develop coherence and convincing arguments and sometimes, proposals contain a lot of details on minor issues and inadequate detail on major issues. The other problem related to literature is that students use a template and they copy the literature review of a related study and paste it in their own study without even relating it to the uniqueness of their study. The cited literature needs to speak loud and clear about the research objectives, questions and the problem statement.

The findings of the current study reveal that the majority of research students poorly build the research link in literature review. It is observed that most research students just mention various research studies in literature review instead of critically analyze and build argument for their research studies in the light of relevant literature. As per the research participants a literature review section is the backbone of research, if backbone is weak, the structure of research proposal collapses. Moreover, it has also been found that the write-up of students is poor, and quality material is a major issue as they are very weak in writing literature review. They cannot articulate and synthesis points. They do not know how to create a link between thesis and antithesis. Students get information about theories and state in research proposal which lack coherence and consistency. The model proposed in the proposal is not persuasively relevant. It has also been seen that research models and theories do not match to hypotheses and research questions.

The literature review is like a story and good story bases on proper sequence of incidents and events. Lack of literature review and interaction with subject experts were cause problems in structuring research problem. If an incident or event is mismatched, the whole story will collapse. Similarly, one argument has to approve or disapprove the other perspective with logic. The supervisors strongly focus that new and latest research articles from authentic research journals should be reviewed. The literature review should address and target the objectives, hypotheses and topic in the context in which the study is to be conducted. Students fail to customize the literature review and cannot present but twist it in their existing context. In other words, they cannot contextualize the materials.

### 3.6 Relating Theoretical Framework to Research Topic

The research supervisors believe that most of the novice students do not have knowledge and understanding of

conceptual and theoretical framework. Furthermore, students do not relate conceptual and theoretical framework to their topic because of poor analytical reading skills. They just read and state the concepts; they state the theories and do not attempt to link the theories to their topic, hypotheses and objectives. Most students do not make specific and defined objectives for their research proposal and it is also witnessed that the objectives of research are presented in a paragraph. This is the reason that majority of research students are poor in presenting appropriate and justifiable conceptual and/or theoretical framework for their research studies. They are lacking in retrospective study, hence, they do not apply a critical approach and generally state what others have said without making its connection to the research study.

### 3.7 Appropriate Research Design

According to research participants, most of the students do not propose a suitable research design in their initial research proposal, the reason for this is that most of sixteen years education programmes (Post-graduation) at our universities are not research based. Therefore, majority of students are weak in developing critical approach and possessing research techniques. It was noticed that research students particularly in social sciences and humanities prefer a traditional research method (quantitative) though the nature of research proposal require a qualitative or mixed method approach. Majority of students suggest chi-square statistical test, which is a non-parametric, for seeking the relationship between two variables without keeping in mind the justification and rationale. They do not identify sampling technique and sometime, they use convenient sampling which is less reliable as compared to other techniques. Sometimes, the proposed statistical test is not appropriate for the mentioned data but students state it without any logic.

## 4. Conclusion

The paper concludes that as per the observation of the research participants research students at universities are lacking research skills. The reason lies in our education system from primary to higher level. Degree awarding institutes have largely focused and encouraged research practice for a decade but still they could not bring the structural reforms. The systematic mechanism of research trainings are needed in public universities so that research students

could excel research skills and techniques. This study concludes that there must be an annual review of the students and inquiry about their needs to complete research study should be asked if they need any training for completing their research. Furthermore, this paper deduces that there is dearth of well-prepared and well-designed research guides in universities of Karachi. Students have very little and poor information about research methods because they do not study and take proposal writing seriously. Students avoid creating their own ideas, applying short cut they copy others' thoughts and ideas. The supervisors suggest that extensive study and wide-ranging literature review can help students to theorize the topic and solve problems. Inversely, students merely rely on reports and articles, they evade book reading. However, book reading is a valuable source of literature and provides tremendous knowledge and facilitates in designing a complete sketches of research outline and objectives. Surplus reading of literature and research articles along with close interaction with supervisor, research experts and senior research fellows helps in doing so effectively.

## 5. References

1. Wong PT, Psych C. How to write a research proposal. Trinity Western University: Langley; 2012.
2. Faryadi Q. How to write your PhD proposal: A step-by-step guide, American International Journal of Contemporary Research. 2012; 2(4):111–15.
3. Bogelund P. How supervisors perceive PhD supervision- and how they practice it, International Journal of Doctoral Studies. 2015; 10:39–55. <https://doi.org/10.28945/2096>.
4. Abdulai RT, Owusu-Ansah A. Essential ingredients of a good research proposal for undergraduate and postgraduate students in the social sciences, Sage Open. 2014; 4(3):1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014548178>.
5. Chrispen C, Chabaya RA, Paul M. Quality research supervisory practices at a distance: Exploring the experiences of Zimbabwe Open University Postgraduate in education students, European Journal of Business and Social Sciences. 2012; 1(4):1–19.
6. Bowden M, Hallahan L, Hall M, Keng SL. Shifting sands: Narratives of quality and compromise in timely postgraduate research supervision and outcomes. Presented in 10th Quality in Postgraduate Research Conference, April 17-20. Stamford Grand Adelaide; 2012. p. 39–57.
7. Ward AE. Empirical study of the important elements in the researcher development journey, Knowledge Management and E-Learning. 2013; 5(1):42–55.
8. Zainal AN. Postgraduate students and their supervisors' perception on effective supervisor: A case study at one public university in Malaysia, The Journal of International Social Research. 2007; 1(1):7–19.
9. Frame IA, Allen I. A flexible approach to PhD research training, Quality Assurance in Education. 2002; 10(2):98–103. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09684880210423582>.
10. Ahmed F, Mahboob U. An analysis of research proposals and challenges faced by postgraduate trainees in internal medicine and allied disciplines during fellowship training program: A qualitative study, Khyber Medical University Journal. 2016;8(2):82–87.
11. Manchishi CP, Ndhlovu D, Mwanza SD. Common mistakes committed and challenges faced in research proposal writing by University of Zambia Postgraduate Students, International Journal of Humanity Social Science Education. 2015; 2(3):126–38.
12. Pietersen C. Content issues in students' research proposals, Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences. 2014; 5(20):15–33. <https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n20p1533>.
13. Common mistakes and problems in research proposal writing: An assessment of proposals for research grants submitted to Research on Poverty Alleviation (Tanzania). Date accessed: 2007. <http://www.repoa.or.tz/publication/common-mistakes-and-problems-in-research-proposal-writing/>.
14. Rubin M. How to get money for research. Feminist press: New York; 1983.