



Global Advanced Research Journal of Social Science (GARJSS) Vol. 2(1) pp. 012-015, January, 2013  
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*Full Length Research Paper*

# **An overview of how to write a dissertation proposal**

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Accepted 01 February, 2013

**Writing and submitting an acceptance research proposal is not a simple task and can be exasperating experience even for the most accomplished and experienced researcher. For most graduate students pursuing masters and PhDs, the time for producing a research proposal and final dissertation is considered as a period of agony and utmost suffering. In most cases out rightly detest the whole idea of writing and submitting a proposal because the whole business' seems to be too complex to accomplish. Arguably, in most universities in East Africa the time for producing a dissertation/ thesis proposal and its final report is probably the most frustrating moment. However, despite all these challenges associated in writing a dissertation/ thesis, there are still some students who write and submit acceptable dissertation proposals within the shortest time possible or within the recommended time period. Students even produce their own proposals and final dissertations well before the officially stipulated time. The purpose of this article is to guide how students can successfully write their proposals. This article is based on personal experience of the author as a doctoral student of Philosophy at Makerere University**

**Keywords:** Overview, write, dissertation proposal.

## **Meaning of a Research Proposal**

Literally, the word 'proposal' means a 'suggestion' or an 'expression of interest'. It could be a suggestion or an expression of interest in a given research project by someone (researcher). The only different is that the interest for research must be expressed in a logical and scientific manner. Additionally, a research proposal is a written presentation of an intended research specifying the problem, purpose, scope, methodology and the budget of the study (Amin, 2003: Oso and Onen, 2005). A well prepared proposal should act as an efficient and

effective guide to the researcher while conducting his/ her study.

## **Role of a Research Proposal**

According to Wong (2002), most students and beginning researchers do not fully understand what a research proposal means, nor do they understand its actual importance. This partly explains the delay and the attitude exhibited during proposal writing and partly why, proposal writing often becomes a nightmare to many upcoming researchers. Whether a proposal is intended to win a grant or it is a requirement for a masters or PhD

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degree, it must convince others that the writer of the proposal has a worthwhile project and also possesses the required competence and work plan to accomplish it.

McGranagh (2004) points out that for a graduate student; a proposal is an intellectual scholastic (not legal) contract between the student and his/ her research committee. It is the proposal that specifies what the researcher wants to do, how he/ she would do it and how he/ she would interpret the results. In that case, in approving one's proposal, the research committee is giving their best judgment that the approach to the research as proposed by the researcher is reasonable and likely to yield the anticipated results. This therefore means, that being clear about what one wants to do, why it should be done, how it will be done and the results expected from the study right from the beginning, will help the student to complete his/ her thesis/ dissertation in a timely fashion. In research, proposals serve many different purposes. They are actually the starting point for most large research projects, including masters and PhD theses/ dissertations. Proposals are used:

To convince other people and the supervisor that the researcher has a worthwhile project to study for example it indicates the value of the work the researcher intends to carry out by identifying how the research will make a difference in the world or resolve a dilemma in existing theory (ies).

To demonstrate expertise in a particular area of study i.e. the researcher shows that he/ she has enough understanding of the research topic to be able to do research properly by intelligently summarizing, comparing and integrating all the relevant theories and existing literature pertaining to a given research topic.

To demonstrate one's competency in his/ her area of study i.e. your reader should be convinced that you have all the necessary skills to carry out the proposed study by describing an appropriate and feasible research method(s).

To serve as a planning tool i.e. the researcher uses the proposal to guide his/ her actions during the course of carrying out the study.

## Types of Proposals

Research proposals can be categorized into two types based on the research paradigms, namely; quantitative and qualitative proposals. A quantitative proposal is a proposal that describes an inquiry informed by the philosophy of logical positivism and one that seeks to understand the world in quantitative and numerical terms. Such studies are more dominant in today's graduate work than ever before. On the other hand, a qualitative proposal is one which describes any inquiry that seeks to

understand the world within the total context of what creates meaning out of people's lived experiences (Amin, 2005). This type of proposal thus describes an inquiry of study with findings that are generally expressed in qualitative and categorical terms.

The writing of quantitative and qualitative proposals is not exactly the same since the two paradigms of research have differences right from conception, design, actual study and data analysis techniques. A researcher needs to be clear of the research paradigms he/ she intends to operate in when developing his/ her proposal. Amin (2005) points out those quantitative studies are theory-based and should be built on clearly specified and detailed questions that will be answered or on hypotheses that are testable. Meanwhile, qualitative proposals describe inquiries which may not be grounded in any theory, but which at the end of the study, can produce a theory (ies). Thus the conception, design and language in which both quantitative and qualitative proposals are presented differ.

## Structure of a Research Proposal

A research proposal is basically made up of three sections: the preliminaries, the text and the appendix section. The preliminary section contains: (a) Title/ topic, (b) Table of content, (c) List of tables, (d) List of figures. The text section is divided into: introduction, literature review and research methodology – forming chapters 1, 2, and 3 respectively. The appendix is comprised of relevant information materials such as: the budget, timeframe, essential documents, maps, etc. that are difficult to include within the text. A list of reference is provided at the end of chapter 3 before the appendices. Therefore, major features of a research proposal can be presented as in the Figure 1.1 below.

## Length of a Proposal

Different institutions have different regulations concerning the number of pages for a proposal. Arguably in most and several universities in the East African region, the recommended length of a proposal for a masters/ diploma dissertation is 15 pages while for PhD is 25 pages including references.

## Criteria for Judging Research Proposals

Remember, every proposal will be examined or vetted to assess its worthiness and the manner in which the candidate (researcher) has presented his/ her ideas. The

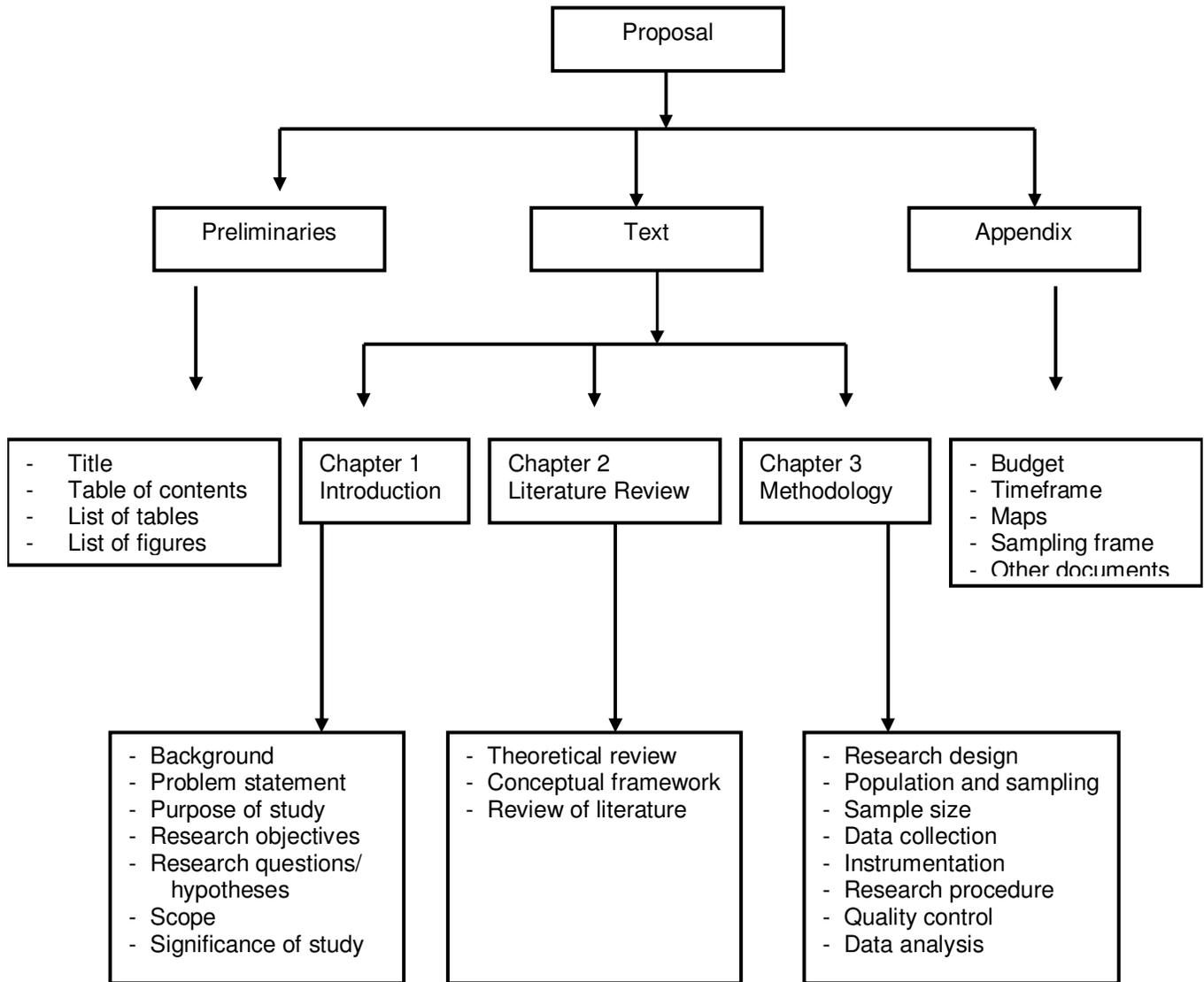


Figure 1.1. Elements of a Research Proposal

following questions will be asked:

Is it researchable?, can reliable data be obtained for this study?, can the result of this study add anything to the frontiers of knowledge in this field?, can the findings provide the researcher with the new knowledge to enable him/ her speaks and others are willing to listen and learn?, is there a gap in knowledge that is worth to be filled by the results of this study?, do the presentation show appropriate techniques and their limitations to carry out this study to effective conclusions?, has it any

originality and novelty? and can the findings from this study when applied in a troubled organization be of assistance to that organization?.

### **Administrative and Personal Issues in Proposal Writing**

Developing and submitting a successful research proposal, demands that the student must address certain

necessary administrative and personal matters. Such issues include: adhering to the official format and procedures, registration with the institution's authority, payment of relevant fees, appropriate relationship with supervisor(s), personal commitment and cooperation with others.

## **CONCLUSION**

Research is very important in the life of an institution and nation. Nevertheless, for systematic conduct of research, sound proposals should be produced. It is, thus imperative, that we should master the knowledge and skills of how to write successful research proposals so that we can convince others that we are able to carry out the research projects we intend to do either for our graduate programmes or otherwise. I wish you all a successful reading.

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