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An Evaluation of How Students Learn to Write Research Proposals: A Case Study of the Master of Education Students in the Faculty of Education, University of Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Writing a research proposal is a crucial step in doing a research project. The quality of the project in most cases is determined by the proposal. One of the limitations of research in education is the scarcity of relevant material that serves as guides for researchers. Available material, though sometimes helpful, tend to bring every researcher outside their territory because of the wrong assumptions made of their unique environments. Eight students studying for a Master's degree in the Faculty of Education at the University of Zimbabwe were studied after a lengthy period of tuition in research methods in order to find out how they fared in proposal writing. The results, after three months of observation, revealed that most of them struggled to put a decent proposal together. This makes proposal writing a rather daunting task for the inexperienced researcher. This paper, therefore, attempts to overcome such limitations.

Introduction

Before students on the Master of Education programme embark on a dissertation, they do a course on research methods. The major aim of this course is to enable them to write a research proposal for their dissertation which is a final year course. According to Chilisa and Preece (2005) a research proposal is a plan of how a research study will be executed, and an estimate of the time and costs involved during the study. The purpose of the proposal is not only to convince the reader that there is a problem that is worth addressing but also that the researcher has the expertise, skill and knowledge to execute the task.

Writing a research proposal is an exercise in independent study. This study tests the student's ability to educate self, to demonstrate expertise in collecting and analyzing information and to come to conclusions based on solid argument. This has proved to be a challenging phenomenon to most students. The point of this paper,

therefore, is to find out how eight Master's students went through the process of writing a research proposal.

Method

Approach and design

This was a mainly qualitative study whose aim was to assess the performance of the students in proposal writing. The case study design was adopted in a bid to allow for an in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by students in proposal writing.

Population and sampling

The population of the study comprised of all the final year Master's students in the Faculty of Education. It is from this population that a sample was drawn. Purposive sampling was used to select eight students from different departments in the Faculty. The number of students selected allowed for an in-depth analysis of the challenges each student faced.

Method of data collection and procedure

Document analysis was the major method of data collection. The documents to be scrutinized were, of course, the students' research proposals. Eight students in their final year of a Master's degree in education were asked to select topics of their own choice and write research proposals based on these topics as shown below:

- 1) Attitudes of Secondary School Pupils towards the Teaching of Mathematics
- 2) Effects of Learning Styles on Ability Grouping
- 3) The Impact of the Medium of Instruction on the Academic Performance of Pupils: A Case Study of David Livingstone Primary School
- 4) The Influence of Home Background on Sexual Relationships among Secondary School Students
- 5) The Validity of Western Standardized Tests in the Placement of Visually Impaired Students in Zimbabwe
- 6) A Comparative Study of the Status of Women as Portrayed in

Ndebele Literature written in Pre- and Post- Independence periods

- 7) An Integration of AIDS Education into the Primary School Curriculum
- 8) The Use of Pre-reading Activities in the Teaching of Comprehension

The students had gone through a semester of tuition in research methods. The research proposals were marked and corrected (by the researcher) several times before they were considered decent. It was from this interaction that the researcher noted the challenges faced by the students in proposal writing. For ethical reasons the names of the students will not be disclosed in this paper.

Evaluating research proposals

Generally, it is often pointed out that there is a serious lack of evaluation of research proposals in education. Evaluation is often difficult because comparisons of quality or effectiveness will vary from topic to topic. However, while it is agreed that there are different types of research, there are some principles which can be applied to the assessment of research proposals across the multiplicity of research endeavours. Kadjevich (2005) brings forward three standards for evaluation of research, i.e. research relevance, research significance and research rigor. Research relevance relates to the extent to which the research is applicable or related to education. However, research relevance is normally not explicitly discussed in proposals. On the other hand, research significance refers to the extent to which the research advances the knowledge of the field and in most proposal formats there is a section dedicated to this aspect. Finally, research rigor pertains to the exactness of the main steps in research from generating questions and goals to answering the questions and attaining the goals. For a research to be rigorous Kadjevich (2005) asserts, it should justify the question, aims and methods of data collection and data analysis. Therefore a good proposal should have a clearly laid down, properly justified and convincing methodology.

Schoenfeld (2002) argues that research in education should be examined along three dimensions namely, trustworthiness, generality and importance. According to Kadjevich (2005), importance is related to research significance, while trustworthiness and generality seem to capture basic aspects of research rigor. The New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSW) (2006) uses two main criteria in assessing the quality of research proposals, these are: theoretical and methodological robustness, and the potential value or impact of the project. The value or impact requires assessment of the value of the research to individuals, groups or systems and its potential to benefit participants. Methodological robustness on the other hand, requires adequate consideration of relevant methodological, conceptual and theoretical issues. It emerges, therefore, from this discussion that the evaluation of research proposals and research in general tends to address the soundness and quality of the research design and the value of the work to both the researcher and user communities.

Results

Overview of the research proposals

It was observed that although the selected topics were researchable, most of the proposals submitted by the eight students were inadequate. Evaluation of the proposals was based on the synthesis of the criteria brought forward by a number of authors in education and other fields, that is, Chilisa and Preece (2005), Yount (2006), Lively (1995), New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education and Training (2006), Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) (2006), Pajares (2007), Bromely et al., (2002), Rose (2012) and White (2006). Most of these scholars and institutions provide checklists as guides for evaluation of research proposals. These checklists are mostly in question form and will be presented together with the results.

Using the above mentioned criteria for evaluating the proposals, it was noted that specific elements were not included or adequately explained in many of the proposals submitted by the eight students. Although the types of research proposals may be many, there are typical elements that ensure clarity of the proposal and demonstrate the knowledge, skills and expertise of the researcher in areas such as the introduction, literature review and methodology. Some of these elements and the major challenges faced by the eight students are outlined below.

Title of the research

A title should indicate what the research is all about and clearly show the field of research, for example, disciplinary issues, teaching methods etc. It should be precise, simple and well focused. Furthermore, the title of the problem should be worded and stated in such a way that it reflects the objectives and nature of the study. For example, if the researcher intends to study the effects of teaching through the technique of concept mapping on student learning at secondary school level, the title of the study may be stated as:

Teaching Through the Concept Mapping Technique and Student Learning

Evaluation: Most of the students did manage to come up with well focused topics. The major weakness was, however, the disparity between the title and the discussion in most parts of the proposal. A few who came up with long, '...rambling and meaningless statements' (CPUT, 2006:2) were helped in shaping the titles. For example, topic three, under the *Method of data collection and procedure* section of this paper, initially read:

An assessment of medium of instruction and its effect on learning at primary school level: A Case Study of Student Performance at David Livingstone Primary School, Harare in Relation to Home Language and Language Medium.

Introductory section

This section gives the background to the problem, states the research problem, explores related literature, suggests the potential contribution of the study to research knowledge and finally lists the research hypothesis, questions or objectives that the study is designed to address. The introductory section of the proposal should be catchy so that any reader can be convinced that the study is worth doing (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003). Let us now have a closer look at the aspects of the introductory section.

Background to the problem

This is a summary in which the researcher argues that there is a

problem. It explains the motivation of the problem and may include an appraisal of the researcher's experiences that led to the emergence of the problem. For example, if a researcher observes that pupils are failing to get distinctions in science, this motivates him to conduct a research. The researcher has to begin with a general overview of the problem. The overview should demonstrate the magnitude of the problem locally and/or internationally. The discussion can be expanded by focusing on all or any one of the following:

- The conceptual/ theoretical framework (explains the concepts and principles from which the knowledge of the problem is derived; and briefly explains the relevant theories to utilise in approaching the problem)
- The historical background to the problem
- The context of the problem (Chilisa & Preece, 2005)

The guiding principle in writing the background to the problem is to include only those details that will be relevant to the understanding of the problem.

Evaluation: Most of the proposals did provide a clear motivation for the study and sufficient information on the history and context of the problem. However, some fell short when it came to providing referenced support for the study as they tended to rely more on casual observations. For example, one student stated '*...the perception that Mathematics is difficult is common across the country and indeed all over the world*'. No authority was cited to substantiate this common claim.

Statement of the problem

This is the most important part of the proposal as the whole process of research revolves around it. It is a summary of the background to the problem. The statement of the problem is the WHO/WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, WHY of the problem. It should clearly answer the following questions: What is the problem? Where/when is the problem occurring? Context: place and time and why is the problem worth my attention? It therefore communicates the focus, importance, scope and context of the problem. Pajares (2007) points out that a problem should stand out in a proposal such that the reader

can easily recognize it. Sometimes, obscure and poorly formulated problems are masked in an extended discussion. In such cases, the reader would have difficulty in recognising the problem. He further argues that the problem should be stated in terms that are intelligible to someone who is generally sophisticated but who is relatively uninformed in the area of investigation. Yount (2006) and CPUT (2006) ask the following questions as a guide to the formulation of a good statement of the problem:

- Is the problem stated briefly, concisely, tersely and objectively?
- Does the researcher indulge in jargon which obscures rather than explains what the problem is?
- Furthermore, Pajares (2007:2) notes that effective problem statements answer the question 'Why does this research need to be conducted?'. If a researcher is unable to answer this question clearly and succinctly, and without resorting to hyperspeaking (i.e., focusing on problems of macro or global proportions that certainly will not be informed or alleviated by the study), then the statement of the problem will come off as ambiguous and diffuse.

Evaluation: Herein lay the major weakness of all the proposals. The students simply had no idea of what a problem statement is. Most of them just replicated the background, they failed to state the problem in clear and explicit terms, and one was left wondering about the purpose of the study. In some cases students came up with multiple problems and it was pretty difficult to judge which one was the major problem. One student wrote:

...feminists have come up with a view that women have been portrayed as the weaker of the human species while men, on the other hand, are viewed as physically, mentally and emotionally stronger. Gender disparity has its roots in the socialisation process whereby the social expectations for the male and female child differ until they reach a stage where each child internalizes the roles of their kind. This prepares the children for their adult roles. As a result, many societies generally accepted the social order which relegated the woman to the kitchen and the role of pleasing men, child bearing and upbringing of the children.

Society disapproves women who stand against the social order and it is this disapproval that discouraged women from questioning the stereotypes and expectations placed upon them by society. The researcher would want to find out how women are portrayed in Ndebele literature.

This statement of the problem leaves one wondering, what it is the problem being investigated? Is it the socialisation or the portrayal of women in novels? The problem is not clearly stated, there is so much of background information in the statement such that the problem is obscure.

Research objectives/ Questions/Hypotheses

These further clarify the purpose of the study and indicate the type of information that is required to fulfill the purpose of the study, and how it will be investigated. Hypotheses are used in quantitative studies, especially with topics where there is a lot known about the problem or where the purpose of the study is to test a theory. A hypothesis is formulated following a review of literature to show the researcher's expectations of the relationship between the variables. A hypothesis can be stated in two forms:

- The directional hypothesis states the researcher's expectations about what the data will show; e.g. *Boys perform better than girls in Maths.*
- In contrast to the directional hypothesis, the null hypothesis states that no relationship exists between the variables studied, or no difference will be found between the variables; e.g. *There is no difference between girls' and boys' performance in Maths.*

Research questions and objectives serve the same purpose as a hypothesis. Research questions and objectives are common in qualitative studies that are exploratory. They help clarify the purpose of the study. One should be able to deduce from the research questions/objectives the nature of instruments to be used, the research design and how the analysis of the problem will be done. NSW (2006) points out that research questions should be feasible, focused, clearly stated and should be clearly linked to the theoretical and physical context of the research and to its intended contribution. The following questions act as a guide to the formulation of proper research questions and objectives:

- Is the research question relevant to the context described?
- Are the research aims/objectives/questions/ clearly defined and focused? (Bromley, et al; 2002)
- Are the research questions appropriately stated given the purpose, design and methods of the study? (Rose, 2012)

Evaluation: Some students did not seem to appreciate the difference between a hypothesis and a research question/objective such that one would find that a student uses two or even all the three in a single proposal. Clearly stating the objectives/questions was also a major problem, some of the questions or objectives were not appropriate for the purpose, design and methods of the study. Instead of clarifying the problem the objectives/questions seemed to bring further confusion into the study. Lastly, the scope of some of the questions/objectives was not manageable within the time frame and context of the study showing that the students were over ambitious. An example of a research question from the study is cited below:

...what are the most appropriate placement tests for the visually impaired students in Zimbabwe?

The problem with this question is that it tends to be prescriptive (appropriate according to whose standards?). Furthermore, it does not seem possible that this question will be adequately answered given the time frame that the study will be conducted. This kind of question requires that one uses both the Western standardised tests and the alternative tests to prove beyond any reasonable doubt that the suggested method of placement is better than the current method (i.e. the Western standardised tests.) This is an insurmountable task to achieve in a month or two.

Significance of the study

This section, as has been noted before by Schoenfeld (2002), Kadjevich (2005) and NSW (2006), is crucial in judging the quality and worthiness of a proposal. The significance of the study is a statement on how the study will contribute to theory, knowledge or practice in the discipline. It is an explanation of how the research findings will be used to improve the quality of education and social life. It should show how society, educational administrators, the

ministry and government will benefit from such findings. The value of the research is judged in terms of its findings being likely to produce lasting educational value for stakeholders in education, therefore researchers should consider whether their findings are transferable, or applicable only within a narrow context or for a short period of time (NSW, 2006). Sponsors of research normally study this section carefully before they decide to fund a project.

Evaluation: Here most of the students did fairly well as they seemed to understand what was required. However, a few proposals failed to show the intrinsic merit of their studies; the likelihood that the research will lead to new discoveries or fundamental advances within the education field. Possible immediate end users or beneficiaries of the results were in some cases not identified.

Literature review

One of the most important early steps in a research project is the conducting of the literature review. According to Trochim (2006) doing literature review is one of the most humbling experiences a researcher is likely to have. Why? Because one is likely to find out that just about any worthwhile idea he has will have been thought of before, at least to some degree. A literature review is designed to identify related research, to set the current research project within a conceptual and theoretical framework. When looked at that way, there is almost no topic that is so new or unique that we cannot locate relevant and informative related research.

Literature review serves as the foundation upon which research is built (Levy & Ellis, 2006). This is because through review of literature:

- The presence of the research problem is established.
- The appropriateness of the research goals for the study – the type of research to be conducted and the research questions to be answered – is similarly established.
- Although the methodology is structured by the research questions, its appropriateness must be established through the literature.
- The manner in which the results are analysed to produce the study's conclusions is also anchored in the literature.

- Literature review will help one to anticipate common problems in his research context. One can use the prior experiences of others to avoid common traps and pitfalls (Levy & Ellis, 2006).

Literature review is meant to help the researcher clarify the issues in his problem area, focus his thoughts, and suggest various directions the research might take. The researcher reports what literature says on the issue(s) and to discuss these issues in relation to the problem he wants to study. Literature review provides the basis for replication of previous studies, identifying the grey areas and finding a niche for one's study.

The basic principle is to start with the general literature related to the problem. This could take the form of theories and concepts and the varying ways in which they have been addressed over a period of time. It is from this review that the significance and rationale of the study emerge. The general review can be followed by a review and discussion of empirical studies related to the study. The researcher should report consistencies as well as inconsistencies in the findings of comparable studies this, may serve as a rationale for the significance of the study. The review should also point to omissions in the literature. Another important aspect is to review the methodology used in the studies. A review of the methodology gives researchers a basis for the method they choose for their study (Chilisa & Preece, 2005).

The review should conclude with a brief summary of the literature and its implications for the problem to be investigated. The implications discussed should also serve as a rationale for the problem studied. There should be a clear link between what is discussed and the problem investigated throughout the review. This link should be consistently brought to the reader by discussing implications of the review on the study. Below are questions that are normally used as criteria for evaluating this section of the proposal:

- Does the related literature section give you the impression that the writer is thoroughly familiar with what is known in the field? (Yount, 2006: 27-2)
- Does the literature review provide an adequate theoretical framework for the study? (CPUT, 2006:7)

- Is there a logical continuity between the research questions and previous educational research? (APA as cited in Rose, 2012: 3)

Evaluation: This section proved to be quite a challenge to most of the students. In doing the literature review they seemed to be pre-empting their studies, instead of finding the grey areas. They failed to clearly show the link between their study and the previous studies. The literature reviews, instead of being a 'true synthesis' of researched material, instead seemed to be mere summaries or reports, (Yount, 2006). The researcher got the distinct impression that the students were not thoroughly familiar with what is known in their various fields of interest. One literature review read as follows:

...Motano (2010) observes that AIDS has become an extremely serious problem in many countries around the world. It is causing a myriad devastating health, social, economic and development problems particularly in developing countries where many governments have declared it an emergency. Kelly (2000) points out that HIV/AIDS is conceptualised as having the potential to affect education through ten different mechanisms: reduction in demand, reduction in supply, reduction in availability of resources, adjustments in response to the special needs of a rapidly increasing number of orphans, adaptation to new interactions both within schools and between schools and communities, curriculum modification, altered roles that have to be adopted by teachers and the education system, the ways in which schools and the education system are organised, the planning and management of the system, and donor support for education.

While the two authors bring very important points for the study, the student failed to show how these issues are related to the study, if anything, it was just a mere narration of what the authorities pointed out. Furthermore, the link between the prevalence of AIDS (Motano) and the impact of AIDS in education (Kelly) is not brought out; the readers are left to establish the connection on their own.

Methodology

This section is extremely important at the proposal stage. As noted before this section is very crucial in evaluating the quality of a

proposal. Wiersma (1995: 409) asserts that '...the methods or procedures section is really the heart of the research proposal. The activities should be described with as much detail as possible, and the continuity between them should be apparent'. This part states how a researcher will proceed with his research. The methodology section discusses the following:

- i) the design adapted for the study
- ii) a description of the population to be studied
- iii) the sampling techniques to be used
- iv) instruments for gathering data
- v) procedures used to carry out the study
- vi) data processing and analysis techniques

These elements will vary depending on whether the research is qualitative or quantitative. Rose (2012: 3) brings forward questions that can be used in the evaluation of the methodology section:

- Is the target population and context adequately identified and described?
- Is the sampling strategy appropriate for the research question and the methodology?
- Have all instruments for data gathering been identified and described in such detail that the reader can make judgments about the instruments validity and reliability?
- In light of the research design and questions, are the treatments/ interventions and data gathering methods appropriate?
- Are the data gathering procedures clear, concise, and reasonable?
- In light of the research design and questions, are the analytical methods clear and appropriate.
- Are the data gathering and analytical methods explained in such detail that they can be replicated by an experienced researcher? (i.e. for a quantitative study)

Let us briefly look at these aspects of the methodology section.

Approach

Is the research going to be qualitative or quantitative? This choice needs careful consideration and a good knowledge of what is meant by the two approaches. Normally a research problem and questions will indicate which approach is most relevant. The most important thing to do is to justify the choice of an approach, why does the study lend itself to the qualitative and not the quantitative approach or vice versa? White (2006) notes that if the research is into people's perceptions, a qualitative approach may be appropriate, but, if the research aims to identify the scale of a problem or need, a more quantitative approach may be appropriate. This means that the approach should suit the research question.

Evaluation: All the proposals were completely inadequate when it came to the methodology section. The students demonstrated a severe lack of understanding of the qualitative and quantitative research paradigms. As a result, the sampling methods, data collection and data analysis methods did not consistently support the chosen approach. Below is an example of one student who had no idea of what is meant by research approach.

... qualitative research is going to be used in this research. The type of research chosen is suitable because it is natural. The learning environment for pupils does not change so it enhances reliability because the sample is not disturbed. The researcher can also describe the process because there is room for that. The research is descriptive so the researcher explains what is done in the classroom. Then it is clear and easy to understand the purpose of the study and expected results.

It is pretty obvious that the student has no idea at all about the two approaches that is why the written research approach is so vague and sounds so confused.

Design

A researcher needs to design the study so that it will answer the questions or test the hypotheses framed for the study. To accomplish this task, the researcher needs to know the designs that fall under the qualitative and the quantitative paradigms. It is prerequisite for the researcher to be familiar with all of them in order to select the most

appropriate one for one's study and to understand research studies conducted by others. One may, for example, use the case study under the qualitative approach or the experimental design under the quantitative approach. There is need to justify the choice here.

Evaluation: As noted above (*evaluation* of the research approach) the students were completely at a loss when it came to the design, most did not even have a section describing it. The few who did, failed to come up with a design that was appropriate for answering the research questions. Some used a qualitative design in a study that was said to be purely quantitative or vice versa.

Population and sample

Identity of the population (i.e. the unit of study, e.g. all the Form 3 pupils in two rural schools) and the sample (part of the population to be studied, e.g. ten pupils in each of the form 3 classes in the mentioned two rural schools) are dealt with here. Different sampling methods are used for a qualitative and quantitative study; these should be clearly described and justified.

Evaluation: Some students ignored this section. Those who attempted it failed to adequately identify and describe the target and accessible populations. The sample size and its characteristics were not clearly described. Some of the samples did not meet the minimum requirements especially in quantitative research, while in some cases the sample size was too large for efficient data collection and analysis. Furthermore, some of the sampling strategies used were not appropriate for the research questions and chosen approach. For example, one student claimed to be using a purely qualitative approach by using simple random sampling.

Methods of data collection

Data collection methods are mentioned and justified in this section of the research proposal. The researcher should identify each instrument, e.g. a questionnaire or an interview schedule, the variables it is designed to measure and the steps that will be followed in using it. These methods are also specific to a certain approach. A common mistake is to mention a variable in the introductory section

of the proposal but fail to indicate how it will be measured when describing the data collection procedures. The converse mistake is to introduce in the research methods section a variable to be measured that was not mentioned in the introductory section. Crucial questions that should be asked as guides to writing this section are:

- Are the data collection strategies congruent with the purpose of the study, the research question, and the type of approach selected? (Lively, 1995)
- Is a range of methods used for triangulation, or is the use of a single method justified?
- Do the methods investigate what they claim to? (Bromely et al., 2002:2)

Evaluation: Students tended to be very brief here, and therefore failed to identify and describe all the instruments or methods for gathering data in sufficient detail. The procedure for data collection was also ignored by most. The few who tried to describe the data gathering procedures failed to do so in a concise and clear manner. Such lack of detail is inexcusable especially in quantitative studies that are mostly concerned with the replicability of a research. The data gathering tools were in some cases not consistent with the chosen approach. It was also not clear what research question or objective was meant to be answered by data collected from some instruments for example:

... the researcher will carry out three focus group interviews. Two interviews with the form two's, and one with a form one class. The researcher will explain to pupils that she wants to gather information for her further studies at the University. The researcher will make the pupils feel at home by giving them snacks and sweets. In addition the teacher will tell them to feel at home since their names will remain private. The researcher will then explain to them what pre-reading activities are and then use a guide to interview the group.

The student here concentrates on building rapport and on ethical issues and completely forgets to explain what information these focus group interviews are meant to collect from the pupils.

Data analysis

The researcher should develop a tentative plan for data analysis because it will have a considerable bearing on the sample size he will need. If the researcher gives no thought to analysis until after data are collected, it will be impossible to analyse them in the way one wishes (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003). Furthermore, in a bid to provide confidence in the findings, the methods for analysing the data should be clearly stated, systematic and appropriate to the nature of the data. This is because a well designed, systematic approach also minimises the possibility of unacknowledged or unrecognised influences on the findings and discourages the selective interpretation of evidence - be it intentional or unintentional (NSW, 2006).

Evaluation: This section was ignored by all the students.

Protection of human subjects

Any research involving the participation of human beings must include a brief summary of the protection procedures in the proposal. Ethical issues affecting the research and how the researcher intends to address them are explained. The purpose is to ensure that the rights of the research participants to confidentiality and freedom from harm are protected.

Time line

A proposal should include a time line that states each step of the study, the approximate date when it will be completed, and the estimated number of hours or days it will require. Creating this time line will help one think through the entire research process and alert him to possible problems.

Evaluation: These last two sections were ignored by students; maybe they felt that they were not important. However, as has been previously stated, the two sections are equally important. One student who tried to discuss ethical issues did that under the methods of data collection section, and as a result failed to adequately address the demands of this section (Refer to example cited in the methods of data collection section).

Overall reflections on the proposals

On the whole, the students failed to demonstrate extensive knowledge of both the research problem and the research methodology. Most of the proposals lacked coherence and the elements of the proposals like research questions, the approach, data collection methods did not consistently support each other. The other major weakness was observed in cases where students tried to use a mixed methods approach in conducting their study, i.e., qualitative and quantitative research complementarily. This type of approach should ideally be used by students who have an in-depth understanding of both approaches. What emerged was that the few students who attempted this approach came up with muddled and confused proposals which focused more on description of the approaches rather than dealing with the problem itself.

As has been noted before, the major problem is the scarcity of relevant material that serves as guides to the novice researcher in the field of education. Lectures in research methods, therefore, need to be more practical than theoretical; students have to be exposed to samples of research proposals and research reports. There should be a practical exercise for most aspects of the course outline, from problem identification to the writing of the actual proposal. They have to be equipped with the tools of evaluation so that they can actually evaluate their work and that of their colleagues. This practical approach will enable them to retain the skills of research writing much more than the abstract and theoretical approaches they are subjected to. However, the problem with this kind of approach is that the research methods course is taught as a faculty wide course where the classes tend to be too large for this kind of approach. The size of the class lends itself to the lecture method. Therefore, tutorials in smaller groups seem to be a better option as this will ensure that each student is given individual attention by lecturers. This option, however, calls for more lecturers and teaching assistants in the faculty wide team.

Conclusion

This paper outlined the basic elements of a research proposal and an evaluation of how the students fared in each section, the major aim being to provide direction to the novice researcher. It should be noted,

however, that these are just basic steps that are meant to throw light on the whole process of writing a research proposal which should have been followed by the eight students in the Master of Education programme. This guide is not in any way exhaustive. Types of proposals will vary according to the institution, supervisor, type of study, and so on. The student is therefore encouraged to explore more on this crucial process of dissertation writing.

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