Understanding Basic Issues in Research

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Preface

Research is a universal endeavour aimed at advancing the frontiers of knowledge. Academic research requires knowing what to do and how to do it in a systematic manner. This book tries to fill a significant gap by confronting, in a lucid manner, most of the issues that confront researchers in the process of starting and winding up their researches. It is the outcome of a 2-day research methodology workshop that was organised by the Department of Political Science, University of Ilorin on 15th and 16th April, 2016 for its postgraduate students at the Lecture Hall (LH) of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ilorin. The first chapter by Professor Hassan A. Saliu, discusses the background issues that surrounds Political Science research. The second chapter by Dr. A. A. Abdullahi and Issah Moshood addresses the issue of problematizing in social science research while, the third chapter by Professor H. A. Saliu and Dr. A. A. Muhammad on proposal writing identifies both the need for a proposal, things that are involved in proposal writing as well as common mistakes that researchers often make in the course of preparing their proposals. In chapter four, Dr. L. Saka contributes on Literature Review and Theoretical Framework, while in the fifth chapter, Professor H. A. Saliu and J. O. Durojaiye engage the qualitative data method. Chapter six by Dr F. A. Aremu is on quantitative data. Dr. Aremu in chapter seven also writes on Report Writing, References and Bibliography. In chapter eight, Professor H. A. Saliu writes on some ethical issues that often confront researchers, especially postgraduate students, in the process of writing and finalising their research. The concluding part of the book is chapter nine where Dr. F. A. Aremu and Dr. J. O. Olaniyi delve on how to conclude a research work.

The simplicity of language and style adopted in the book makes it a relevant source material for undergraduate and postgraduate students. In addition, the articles are written by individuals with practical experiences in teaching, research and supervision and thus, conversant with common mistakes which researchers are more prone to make and which, of course, affect the quality of their research outputs. It is, therefore, a modest contribution from the Department of Political Science, University of Ilorin, Nigeria, towards meeting the needs of researchers.

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Dedication

To Professor Arthur Ebunoluwa Davies, second Professor to be produced in the department, who recently retired from the department after over thirty years of a meritorious service to the University.

About the Editors

Professor Hassan A. Saliu is Professor of Political Science at the University of Ilorin. He has a B.Sc. from Bayero University, Kano; M.Sc. from Obafemi Awolowo University and a PhD from Bayero University, Kano, all in Political Science. He specialises in International Relations and has been teaching Research Methodology to undergraduate and postgraduate students for years and has also edited many books on Research Methodology. He is a scholar of repute known within and outside Nigeria and his articles have appeared in several national and international outlets.

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CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH PROPOSAL WRITING

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Introduction

Research generally is an attempt to create and recreate knowledge. Scientific research is an attempt to systematically understand or explain a phenomenon, the objective of which is to solve a particular problem. In other words, research is the search for knowledge through systematic and objective method in order to find solution to a particular problem (Kothari and Gang, 2014). This problem-solving goal of research represents a convergence among scholars. Postgraduate study can be viewed in this context. But as a project requires planning prior to its commencement, so also is research. In this case, a research proposal represents the first stage in a research endeavour as it shows the direction or intention of the researcher. Also called a research protocol, the length of a proposal depends largely on the field of study. But irrespective of the length, it should be precise and straight to the point. In essence, a research proposal is the tentative systematic explanation of what and how of the research process.

Nature and Significance

The main objective of the proposal is to present a plan of action on how a particular research will be conducted. According to Lourens (2007), a research proposal answers two main questions viz, what is the problem to be investigated and how the problem will be investigated. It must, however, be stressed that a distinguishing hallmark of the proposal as distinct from the actual research is that the language of the proposal is futuristic. This key element of a proposal is universal to all forms of research. Quoting Bak, 2004:3-5, Lues and Lateng, (2006) identified three important aims of a proposal. They are first, the proposal's ability to explain the need for the particular research in a convincing manner. This according to them involves convincing others that a problem exists, and something must be done about it. Second, the proposal must give an indication that the researcher is skilled and well equipped to do the work and third, the proposal must demonstrate a prospect of contributing to knowledge in the field.

In a similar vein, Lues, Laetus, Lategan and Vermeulen (2011) identified what they called characteristics of a research proposal to include:

1. It should be brief and concise as much as possible;
2. the problem statement should be clearly articulated;
3. The use of language should be clear and unambiguous; and
4. Giving a clear preview of the course of the research.

From the various submissions, we can infer that a research proposal is expected to speak to a neutral audience in an intelligible manner to the extent that questions that could agitate the minds of the audience would have been anticipated and addressed.

Steps Involved in Research Proposal Writing / Contents of a Research Proposal

It is important to state from the outset that the language of a proposal should be futuristic or tentative. This is because, the intention is just being expressed and the research has not been carried out. Also, a good research proposal is expected to form the opening chapter in an academic research with minor modifications. This creates the need for students to be more serious and focused on proposal writing because it is expected to reveal the intention of the researcher to the supervisor(s). To be focused, therefore, involves having the right thing in the right place. A typical research proposal is expected to include the following:

Background Information: This section is expected to give the title of the research to be embarked upon as well as the researcher(s) name, contact and other details. The title is expected to be precise and not wordy but must contain enough information about the study and expectedly, go to the point. Lues, Laetus, Lategan and Vermeulen (2011) suggested having not more than 12 words. This, however, varies from supervisors to supervisors or from institutions to institutions. For some it could be up to 16 or 20. For example at University of Ilorin, it is a maximum of 18 words. In addition, a good title must include the relevant variables only and must not be in question form (Lues and Lateng, 2006). The authors went further to give some guidelines which can as well serve as veritable source of a good title. These include; discussing with supervisor or experts in the field of interest; to engage in brainstorming on the issue area; to search data base of completed researches and scanning through other academic resources (Lues and Lateng, 2006).

Background to the Study or Preamble: In this section, a general background on build up to the subject of research is provided. This can be historical or issue based depending on the ability of the researcher and or preference of the supervisor. But it must be concise and ‘whet the appetite’ of the reader. In other words, it is expected to be fascinating and act as a magnet that would encourage the reader to be interested in reading the work.

Research Problem: Research always begins with the identification of a problem. If there is no problem, there will be no need for research because it is the section that identifies what a researcher wants to research on. According to Lues and Lategon (2006:9), 'it is a statement that communicates the main idea of your proposed research, and it indicates what problem you want to solve through your research project'. For this reason, the research problem must not be ambiguous and based on preference, may be stated in question form. In this case, it is unnecessary to have a separate section for research questions. An ambiguous research problem statement may lead to obtaining the wrong data. It should also be noted that a research problem may originate from gaps in previous studies or from practical situations. For instance, previous studies may largely focus on one aspect of a phenomenon with little emphasis on some other aspects or there may be a generalisation of peoples' attitude towards an issue without cognisance of some exceptions that may exist. It not mandatory that research problem statement should be lengthy but it can be stated in one or two sentences depending on the ability of the researcher to capture the issues involved.

Aim and Objectives: The aim states what the researcher wants to do after identifying the problem. It is the utmost goal of the research and it is better stated in one sentence. The objectives serve as riders to the aim of the research and must be in line with the research questions raised. For example, if a research question is 'what is the name of my classmate'; a corresponding objective will be to 'find out the name of my classmate;. In essence, both the statement of the research problem, research questions and objectives are directly related and belongs to a continuum. Also, the aim and objectives must be clear and achievable.

Review of Relevant Literature and Theoretical Framework: Literature in this context refers to earlier works that have been done on the subject of investigation. It is under this section that the researcher demonstrates an awareness of previous works on the subject. This can take two forms in the proposal. First, a researcher can embark on a comprehensive review of literature or second, do a synopsis of existing literature. While it is advisable to start with latest publications, dated literature also should not be ignored.

A theory implies a collection of tested variables which can still be verified. It is the application of theories to the understanding of social phenomenon that makes the discipline to have scientific value. Therefore, it is essential for any research in the field of social sciences or sub field of political science to incorporate aspects of a theoretical framework. While details about the theory to be used are expected to be given in the main research, the research proposal must as well provide a synopsis.

This would enable the reader to determine if the study is relevant to existing body of knowledge in the field or if it is suitable for the work.

Rationale or Justification: For some scholars, this section may be unnecessary as it can be accommodated under the aims and objectives. It is the section that justifies why the work is necessary. It gives a concise explanation of the reasons why the work is necessary. In many cases, justification can result from gaps noticed in the literature. A research can also be justified on the strength of its contribution(s) to knowledge. What is important is that, there must be a strong and convincing justification of why the research is conducted.

Formulation of Hypotheses and Research Assumptions: Hypotheses are tentative statements to be tested in the course of the research. They are not confirmed statements but conjectures which can be accepted or rejected after the research is completed. Also, hypotheses state the relationship between two or more variables and this can be positive or negative. In other words, there could be H1 which in most cases is positive as well as H0 which in most cases is negative. For example, 'the attitude of students towards the library will be positive' (H1) and second, the attitude of students towards the library will not be positive' (H0). It should be noted that researchers should be guided by the data obtained in accepting or rejecting an hypothesis rather than preference of what is desired. It should also be noted that hypotheses is better used where measurement between two or more variables is involved. That is, when doing quantitative analysis. Qualitative data requires assumptions. Also in the case of assumption, it is only tentative and may be accepted or rejected after the research is completed.

Research Methodology: It is not enough to state what is to be done but also, how it is going to be done. This statement encapsulates the methodology. In other words, it is a set of scientific modalities or systematic steps used to execute a research endeavour in order to address the stated problems and achieve the research's aim and objectives. Depending on the discipline and preference, the research methodology may form a separate chapter and may as well be part of chapter one. However, for a proposal, it is usually not lengthy but must capture the basic ingredients such as approach and research design, instruments of data collection as well as method of data analysis. The essence is to be able to determine whether the process of carrying out the study is suitable or otherwise. It is also important for researchers to always keep their research aims in mind while formulating research methodology.

Organisation of the Study or Outline of Chapters: Organisation of chapters is discipline-specific. It is therefore the responsibility of the researcher to find out the

demand of his/her area of study in terms of length of the work. What is important is that the outline of the chapter should reflect the content of the work and all chapters must complement each other (Lues and Lantang, 2006). While it is mandatory that each chapter should be devoted to a specific theme, the first chapter is usually the introductory chapter while the last concludes the work. In-between the first and the last chapter there could be variations depending as stated earlier on the demands of the field of study. For proposal sake, the researcher should be able to explain the extent of his work and the specifics of each chapter.

Time Frame and Outline of Budget: Time is an important element in planning and formulation of policies. So also is it in research. This is because, it specifies the specific period within which an activity is to be started and concluded including mobilisation of available human and material resources. A research proposal is expected to give a time line within which the study is to be carried out. On the one hand, this would challenge the researcher to ensure a timely completion of the project, and on the other hand, it is likely to prevent a deviation from the focus of the research as a result of several intervening variables that may crop up. However, the time set must be one that is realistic. Also, researchers are expected to bear in mind those activities which they do not have control over and which may affect the timing of the project.

Related to the time frame is the budget estimate that is expected to complete the work. While this may not be accurate in the beginning, it is important to provide a working estimate for the project. The budget is expected to include both the sources of fund as well as what amount will be committed at every stage of the work. Although there is no limitation to the amount that could be committed to a research, an academic researcher is expected to note the following in his expenditure budget; searching for literature, field survey and associated expenses, stationery, transportation, editing and binding.

Bibliography: The bibliography at this stage is tentative in the sense that there could be addition when the work is completed. However, a researcher is expected to give full details of the literature consulted in the course of the research. In addition, certain things must be borne in mind by the researcher. 1. Bibliography is different from Referencing 2. Start compiling your bibliography immediately you start reading to avoid leaving out some and 3. Use only the preferred referencing style of your discipline.

Common Mistakes Associated with Research Proposal Writing

1. The Research Problem is not clear or ambiguous: If there is no problem, there will be no need for research. A Student must be able to state the problem he/she

has discovered which necessitates the research in clear and concise manner. The problem must not be too restrictive or too broad. Where identified problems are murky, the focus of the research becomes unclear neither will the research add to the existing body of knowledge. Similarly, the research problem is not about the students' problems but issues that are associated with the research.

2. The review of literature is too restrictive or not relevant to the research or out-dated: In this case, students are expected to demonstrate familiarity with existing knowledge in the discipline. However, many students in an attempt to do this parades old knowledge about the phenomenon. The implication of this is that, such knowledge may have been up-dated and new thinking may have emerged on the subject of study. Also, literature reviewed may at times not relevant to the proposed subject. The analogy to this is like having **the hands of Jonah and the body of Esau**. For instance, if a student is writing on the *Sharia* legal system and reviewing a literature on religion. Although *sharia* may be a religious terminology but it is more appropriately, a type of legal system.

3. Where the methodology is vaguely described, not relevant or does not contain enough detail: The methodology in any research answers the question of how to go about the research especially collecting and analysing data. Common errors that are mostly committed in this area include not describing the methodology properly especially in quantitative research or where it is irrelevant to the research that is about to be undertaken. For example, it is inappropriate for a researcher who wants to carry out a perceptive study to rely solely on descriptive method of data analysis. Equally, the methodology is expected to give enough detail on how the researcher hopes to collect and analyse his data. For instance, it is inappropriate for a researcher to claim to want to use primary sources to generate data without specifying the form he wants to adopt. Similarly, claiming to want to use questionnaire without being explicit on the nature of the questionnaire is inappropriate.

4. Unclear aims and objectives: This is the case where the expected outcome of the research endeavour is not clear. This makes it difficult to match the research questions with the expected output.

5. Unrealistic budget: Every research has its monetary costs and this is stated in a budget. However, some budgets may be under estimated or over estimated. The implication of this on the research is that it creates a long run problem for the researcher especially if the case is under budgeting. If it is over budgeting, the researcher may be discouraged from the outset from embarking on the research.

Equally, some budgets may not be detailed enough to capture every steps in the research endeavour.

6. Not paying Attention to details: This problem often affects every stage of the research proposal writing. First there is the problem of stopping too short or saying too much. A researcher is expected to be precise and concise at this stage as the impression given here robs on the possible outcome of the proposal. Second, there may be temptation of being in haste to commence the research proper which often leads to committing several errors. The bottom line is that the researcher needs to be focused, have a full grasp what is to be done and to pay much attention to details.

Conclusion

Undertaking research is a serious business and should be treated as such. A first step in this direction is having a graphic picture of what one wants to do which is the essence of the proposal. Where the proposal is not illuminating enough, the research proper will definitely be affected. On the one hand, it becomes difficult for the proposal to get approved and on the other hand, it amounts to falling before commencing the race which in any case is discouraging. The beauty of the proposal is that some else other than the author should be able to execute it successfully. Thus as Lues, Laetus, Lategan and Vermeulen (2011) concluded, the research proposal has to be a tangible research recipe that really works.

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