How to Write a Good PhD Proposal: The Experience of Novice Researchers

Krishna Regmi, Sharada Regmi

Study toward the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) is a process of making discoveries, which may be new empirical findings, new theoretical insights, or an improved understanding of important issues (Phillips & Pugh, 1994). A PhD dissertation needs to say something quite new, rather than collating or repackaging existing knowledge (Creedy, 2007). Completing the requirements for the PhD may, therefore, present a real challenge. Contrary to popular assumption, the process is largely achieved by making a series of small steps, rather than taking giant leaps. This article presents some of the key elements of producing a good PhD proposal from the experience of novice researchers who are currently in the process of obtaining a PhD.

The Process

Writing a PhD proposal is a formal process guided by the faculty at the institution where the student is admitted. The proposal is a written plan and justification for the research topic and method of study that as a research student you want to explore for your doctoral work. A PhD proposal essentially consists of most of what will normally be the first three chapters of your dissertation. This includes the introduction, the literature review and the research methodology (Perry, 1998). In preparation for writing your proposal, consider the following parameters: have well-defined research questions that your study will answer and know the literature related to your topic, including knowing who the experts are and their arguments or positions. You also need to understand the relevant theoretical perspectives and have a plan to carry out the research. Your plan includes the methodology, the sample or sources of information, a title or brief statement that helps you define and maintain your focus on the actual research tasks or problem, and an awareness of how much time the research work will take.

A good PhD proposal will normally include three basic sections: the introduction to your topic and the background for your research work, a review of the literature and a description of the methodology. The introduction section includes a description of the background surrounding the issue you plan to study, questions that your research hopes to answer, the important contribution to knowledge and practical benefits of your study, and the theoretical basis for your study. The review of the literature section normally presents and discusses the literature focusing on what research has been done on your topic or area, the gaps and issues involved and highlights of the theoretical disagreements, controversies, contradictory research and the practical issues that give the issue importance. The final methodology section should show precisely how you plan to carry out your research. It should describe the general approach of field work vs. desk work, methodological diversities (qualitative vs. quantitative; descriptive vs. analytical) as well as theoretical perspective. Your proposal will be assessed by various people from your University before you can proceed to conduct your research. The box below outlines some elements of an outstanding dissertation proposal.

What makes an outstanding PhD thesis?

- An artistic endeavour where the student is designing the work and there is elegance of the design,
the synthesis, and the execution;
• Creativity;
• Design—how everything all fits together;
• A well-sculpted piece of work.
(Mullins & Kiley, 2002)

The Plan
The following sections include advice on developing the individual chapters of your proposal. The introduction should be a concise presentation of your thesis in the situation or context for the research. If you are doing work in the social sciences, this context may have cultural, institutional, historical and socio-economic and political aspects that need to be described. This will give you a clear and interesting picture of what your research is all about. Normally, proposals are not expected to be too long. If a thorough discussion of the context of the research study will take too much space, then reserve it for a separate chapter in the final thesis. For example, a historical perspective might be inserted after the literature review prior to the methodology chapter. Confining your introduction in this case to the information needed to get a general picture of the research situation.

You should do as thorough a job as possible in literature review for your proposal. Do not leave this for later! Remember, the validity and importance of your thesis and the direction you choose for the research methods will depend on an expert understanding of what has already been done by others. Neglecting to be thorough at this stage might cause a lot of grief later. Even if your methods and specific topic are unique, you could miss some vital information that could improve your approach to your study. It is, however, not uncommon for students to find that the research they have been working on has already been done by someone else. Do not wait until you have finished doing your research to discover this.

The methodology section proposes how you will actually do your research. A well-developed methods section helps to define your research goals and makes the research more feasible and easier to plan and schedule. Consider carefully your methodology and what results you expect it will produce; a change of method or direction when you do the actual research creates delays and additional work because you will have to rewrite your methodology section for inclusion in your final dissertation. It is equally important to anticipate some possible problems or difficulties that you might possibly encounter. Include these in your proposal as this will help you while constructing your research design and figuring your schedule (Creedy, 2002).

A Few Tips
Finally, include a proposal schedule (Gantt chart) for your project. It helps to show that you know what you are doing by being able to project and predict how much time it will take to do your research and write up your thesis. If you find that the project will take more time than you are able or willing to give, you have some options: 1) scale back your research questions and methods to something more practical; 2) read other proposals in order to get a sense of proper scope and organisation (benchmarking); or 3) consult your adviser(s) for additional suggestions.

It’s important to approach the process of developing your PhD proposal systematically. The proposal is your roadmap to your destination. Without a good roadmap, PhD students risk wandering around in the academic and research wilderness for a long time.

References

Copyright 2008: The Author
Journal Compilation Copyright 2008: Blackwell Publishing Ltd

Authors: Krishna Regmi, MPH, PGDipEd, PGCert(SocDev), FHEA, PhD Research Student, University of the West of England, Bristol BS16 1DD, UK, & Sharada Regmi, BSN, BEd, RN, Senior Nurse, Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Hospital, Reading, 186 Liverpool Reading, RG1 3PH, UK

Print this article  Email it to a friend

Back to Table of contents  View all articles in this issue