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Common Mistakes Committed and Challenges Faced in Research Proposal Writing by University of Zambia Postgraduate Students

Peter Chomba Manchishi, Daniel Ndhlovu and David Sani Mwanza
School of Education, University of Zambia

Abstract

Proposal writing is an important part of postgraduate studies at the University of Zambia. The aim of this study was to establish the common mistakes committed and challenges faced by postgraduate students in the school of education at the University of Zambia. The study was purely qualitative. A total of 100 respondents were randomly sampled 80 of which were masters students while 20 were lecturers. Data was collected through face to face interviews with lecturers and focus group discussions with masters' students. To do so, interview guides and focus group discussion guides were used. Data was analysed qualitatively through categorisation of data into identified themes according to research objectives. The findings of the study showed that students' mistakes in writing the proposal included: broad and unclear topics, failure to state the problem, failure to identify the gap in the literature, using wrong methodology, misunderstanding research terminology, wrong referencing style and plagiarism. The challenges which students faced included: unavailability of lecturers for consultations, negative comments from supervisors, and limited time in which to write the proposal, lack of materials and lack of co-ordination between DRGS, Assistant Dean- School of Education and the Lecturers/ supervisors. The paper concludes that there is need to review the way the methodology course (EDR) is taught in the school of education. Further, there is need for students, lecturers, and the office of the Assistant Dean responsible for postgraduate studies and the Directorate of Research and Graduate Studies to work cohesively for the good of postgraduate studies.

Keywords: Proposal, Mistakes, Challenges, Post Graduate Students, School of Education, University of Zambia, Directorate of Research and Graduate Studies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Background

The University of Zambia (UNZA) has been offering graduate programmes since the 1980's. At the beginning, the programmes were mainly in the schools of Education and Humanities and Social Sciences. However, during the 1990's all the schools in the University of Zambia started offering graduate programmes. Currently, the largest number of students in concentrated in the schools of Humanities and Social Sciences, Education and Medicine. The enrolment in 2013 for all the programmes stood at 1,178 students for masters programmes, 89 for PhD programmes and 11 postgraduate diploma.

Before students proceed to collect data, they are required to have their research proposals approved.

Krathwohl, (2005:1) stated that

"The goal of a research proposal is to present and justify a research idea you have and to present the practical ways in which you think this research should be conducted. Research proposals contain extensive literature reviews and must provide persuasive evidence that there is a need for the research study being proposed. In addition to providing rationale for the proposed research, a proposal describes detailed methodology for conducting the research consistent with requirements of the professional or academic field and a statement on anticipated outcomes and/or benefits derived from the study".

Krathwohl (2005) added that a proposal should contain all the key elements involved in designing a complete research study, with sufficient information that allows readers to assess the validity and usefulness of the proposed study. The only elements missing from a research proposal are the results of the study and the analysis of those results. Finally, an effective proposal is judged on the

quality of one's writing. It is, therefore, important that the writing is coherent, clear, and compelling.

Paul and Psych (2012) noted that one's research is as good as one's proposal and that an ill-prepared proposal dooms the research project while one that has well been designed promises success and good impression to the makers. For this reason, Paul and Psych (2012) argued that a research proposal should convince others that your topic is worthy researching and that you are a competent researcher. Masters students at the University of Zambia are supposed to write a proposal before they embark on data collection and eventual writing of a dissertation.

The recommended University of Zambia proposal format includes the following:

1.Introduction

- Background
- Statement of the Problem
- Purpose of the Study
- Research Objectives
- Research Questions/Hypothesis
- Significance of the Study
- Delimitation of the study
- Limitation/s of the Study
- Operational Definitions

2. Literature Review

3. Methodology

- Research Design
- Target Population
- Sample Size and Sampling Techniques
- Research Instruments
- Data Collection Procedure
- Data Analysis

4. References

5. Timelines

6. Budget

A masters student writes a proposal under the guidance of a supervisor who is normally a senior member in the field of study. After the submission of the proposal, it is marked by three examiners who do not include the supervisor. While some students score high marks, others obtain low marks, yet others are asked to resubmit when the proposal is deemed unsatisfactory. While this has been going on since postgraduate studies were introduced at the University, no study has been conducted to establish the common mistakes committed and challenges faced by masters students in proposal writing.

Statement of the Problem

Some students' proposals have taken long to be approved because they have been found to be problematic. The research problem in this study was what are the common mistakes committed and challenges faced by postgraduate students at the University of Zambia when writing research proposals?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to establish the common mistakes committed and problems

faced by postgraduate students at the University of Zambia when research proposal writing?

1.4 Study Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Establish the common mistakes committed by masters' students when writing research proposals.

2. Determine challenges faced by masters' students when writing research proposals.

3. Asses the grades of the research proposals by the examiners.

4. Establish masters students' and supervisors' views on mistakes committed and challenges faced when writing research proposals.

Research Questions

1. What are the common mistakes committed by masters students when writing a research proposal?

2. What challenges do masters students face when writing a research proposal?

3. How are the grades that masters students score in research proposal writting?

4. What are the masters students' and supervisors' views on mistakes committed and challenges faced when writing research proposals?

Significance of the Study

To our knowledge, there has not been any study undertaken to review postgraduate research proposals at the University of Zambia. Hence, the findings may be used by the school of Education to improve upon the quality of the students' proposals and consequently, good research. In addition, the results may also be used to enhance the school course on educational research titled "EDR 5010 Educational Research Methodology and Proposal Witting".

Limitation of the Study

The study was only conducted in the school of Education hence, the findings may not be generalised to the other eight schools in the University. Another research covering possibly all the schools is required.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents reviewed literature related to common mistakes committed and problems faced by postgraduate students in writing research proposals.

Kikula and Quorro (2007) conducted a similar study in Tanzania and found that out of 783 research proposals submitted, 71% of the titles either were too broad or lacked focus, 72% of the introductions lacked clarity and focus, 84% of the statement of problems showed problems ranging from no problem statement, lack of clarity and focus to covering irrelevant issues. In addition, 71% of the study objectives reviewed did not have clearly stated objectives, 86% of the literature review sections showed inadequate literature, lack of focus, no literature at all and poor presentation of the review. As regards methodology, 73% of the proposals lacked clarity. It was also found that 88% of the sampling procedures were not explained while 89% of the data analysis sections were not clearly stated or were omitted.

Kombo and Tromp (2011) identified problems of titles being too wide, too wordy and lacked consistency with the text. Another problem found was poorly written background to the study. For instance, there was no difference between background and literature review. In addition, quoting studies but not explaining how they fitted in the background section. Defining the research problem also posed a challenge to many writers of research proposals. When it came to literature review, many writers failed to relate the literature reviewed with the proposed study.

Scribendi.com (2013) identifies common mistakes in writing literature review. These included not using key words to search for literature, not identifying relevant sources and not relating the study findings with literature review. Other mistakes were relying on secondary rather than primary sources and not critically analysing the literature reviewed.

National University of Malaysia (2008) noted that dissertations had referencing mistakes. The references cited in the text were not included in the reference section or vice versa. In addition, there were mistakes of incorrect way of citing authors in instances where there were more than two authors. For example, it was common to cite Manchishi, Ndhlovu and Nyambe (2013) instead of Manchishi et al (2013).

Best and Kahn (2009) noted that researchers did not guard against limitations and sources or error inherent in the process of analysis and interpretation of data. These included confusing statements with facts, failure to recognise limitations, careless or incomplete data entry, faulty logic and researcher's unconscious bias.

Cohen et al (2001) noted a problem of ethical dilemma surrounding overt and covert observation methods of collecting data. Unlike in the overt research where participants knew that they were being researched on and provided informed consent, the covert research participants did not know that they were being researched on and in many cases, the principle of informed consent was violated. To the contrary, Hamphreys (1975) and Mitchell (1993) argue that not soliciting for informed consent in covert research was not unethical because there were some knowledge that were legitimately in the public domain but access to which was only available to the covert researcher.

Bell (1993) cited unclear instructions in the research instruments, vague question items or using words that respondents found difficulty to understand.

REPOA (2007) outlined common mistakes and challenges in proposal writing. This was after they had evaluated proposals which were submitted for funding in Tanzania. The report stated that there were mistakes starting with the title. Most titles were too broad and lacked focus because of being wordy ad general. Some of the titles did not reflect what was going to be done. The introductions were also unclear and lacked focus too. On statements of the problem, only 16% of the proposals had a well written problem statement. The rest were unsatisfactory ranging from no problem at all to lack of clarity and articulation, too broad and in some cases, the problems were not relevant. The other problem was that writers failed to identify the correct data analysis techniques.

Charema (2013) argued that choosing a topic is probably the most challenging part of carrying out research. He advises that a topic should not be too wide and one should not choose a topic in an area which has been over-researched.

Mhute (2013) observed that plagiarism is one of the common mistakes committed by students. Plagiarism as the act of presenting another's work or ideas as your own. Mhute (2013) therefore advises that plagiarism should be avoided as it is unethical and it's a standards issue.

Paul Wong and Psych (2012) summarised the common mistakes committed by students when writing the proposal as follows:

- Failure to provide the proper context to frame the research question.
- Failure to delimit the boundary conditions for your research.
- Failure to cite landmark studies.
- Failure to accurately present the theoretical and empirical contributions by other researchers.
- Failure to stay focused on the research question.
- Failure to develop a coherent and persuasive argument for the proposed research.
- T oo much detail on minor issues, but not enough detail on major issues.
- Too much rambling — going "all over the map" without a clear sense of direction.
- Too many citation lapses and incorrect references.
- Too long or too short.
- Failing to follow the APA style.

- Slopping writing.

Duze (2010) conducted a study in Nigeria whose purpose was to analyse problems encountered by postgraduate students. A siminar study was conducted at the University of Oxford by Triawell and Goddet (2005) The findings of both studies were similar to Paul, Wong and Psych (2012) as cited above. As for the problem among the findings of the study were; funding, library facilities, accommodation and personal problems (family).

From the reviewed literature, it is clear that there are different types of mistakes committed and challenges faced by students. Since all the studies reviewed were conducted outside Zambia, it was important that a contextual study was conducted at the University of Zambia. The common mistakes committed and challenges faced by postgraduate students at the University of Zambia in writing research proposals were not known and it was therefore necessary that this study was conducted.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study was a case study in that it was conducted in only one school out of nine. This design was preferred because we wanted to have an in-depth understanding or information about common mistakes committed and challenges faced by masters students when writing research. The study employed a qualitative method.

Target population

The target population for this study was all the ninety two (92) 2013 first year postgraduate students who were doing taught masters and all the supervisors of masters research in the School of Education at the University of Zambia.

Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

One hundred (100) respondents formed the sample. These consisted of eighty (80) students and twenty (20) supervisors. In order to provide each student an equal chance to be selected in the sample, simple random sampling technique was used. As for the supervisors, they were purposively selected. The criterion used in selecting them was experience or seniority in supervising postgraduate research

Research Tools

The study used interview guides and focus group discussion guide to collect data. This made it possible for the researchers to ask follow-up questions in order to have thorough and detailed information on the subject matter.

Data Collection Procedure

Face to face interviews were conducted with the supervisors. During the interviews the researcher took down notes where responses were not clear, follow up questions were asked. Focus groups discussions were conducted with the students. During the discussions, the researcher took down notes. Apart from questions from the researcher, students were also given an opportunity to seek for clarifications on research proposal writing.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions was analysed using the constant comparative method. That is, data was categorised into themes, then interpreted.

Ethical Issues

In order to maintain confidentiality, names of students who wrote the proposals which were reviewed are not appearing in the report. Furthermore, both students and supervisors willingly participated in the study that is, they were not forced. Those who were not interested to participate were free to do so.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings below are presented according to the research objectives.

The first research objective was to establish common mistakes committed by masters' students when writing the research proposal

Lecturers who were also supervisors for masters' students were interviewed and asked about the mistakes which students committed. The following were their responses:

One of the mistakes was that students did not understand their own topic because they did not read around the topic. Hence, students came up with topics which they did not fully understand. Some topics were also misleading. What the title suggested was different from what the main body of the proposal had. Some respondents also said that these problems were caused by two things. One lecturer said "they do not read. They just come up with topics which they don't understand. The reading culture is bad among students". This agrees with what was found in the proposal assessment report by REPOA (2007) in Tanzania in which the results showed that 71% of the titles were unsatisfactorily written. Some were unclear while others were long and clumsy. A small number of titles did not reflect what was intended to be done during the research while some of the inadequate titles were too wordy and lacked focus. In the case of Zambia, two explanations were given for the bad titles. Firstly, lack of reading by students. Secondly, some supervisors had a habit of giving students topics for which a student had no motivation or knowledge about. One lecturer stated "some students are given topics by their supervisors for which they know nothing about. But they do not read as well". It appears from this that some supervisors did not understand the extent to which they should help students. It is the duty of students to identify topics and supervisors can only help in perfecting the focus of the topic. This is so because if a student fails to come up with a topic, he/she will find it extremely difficult to identify the gap in the literature, fail to come up with proper research objectives and questions, and possibly fail to come up with suitable methodology. Hence, supervisors should find a constructive way of scaffolding their students around the topic.

Another mistake is that of having topics whose answers the students already know. This implies that some students come up with irrelevant topics. This is the reason why Charema (2013) while acknowledging that coming up with a topic is challenging, advises that a student should come up with a topic which is not too wide and it should be in an area which has not been over-researched. This is particularly crucial because if one comes up with a topic in an over-researched area, chances are very high that answers to the research questions would have been already known. This also raises questions on the calibre of the students. In this study, Supervisors stated that students came up with proposals with research questions whose answers were found in the background and literature review sections of the proposals. This clearly shows that some students lacked quality and abilities which are required for masters' students. Another mistake associated to students' low quality is the fact that students did not know how to define terms in the proposals. Instead of giving the operational definition, students got definitions from the internet and text books. The question therefore is the research methodology course adequately preparing students to write good proposals? It may be helpful to reconsider how the research methods course is taught because while some students seem to be generally weak, they may also lack adequate preparation by their lecturer.

Students in their interviews also acknowledge their weakness in identifying the topic. Students stated that identifying a topic was a huge challenge. They reported that when they come up with a topic, they are told that the topic is either unsearchable or that someone has already done a study on the same topic. One respondent said "a topic is a challenge for us because for us to come up with a topic which is relevant to the field of study is hard".

Another serious mistake is students' inability to state the problem being investigated. Lecturers said that masters students at UNZA normally can come up with a proposal where the research problem was missing. The proposal would have a part of for statement of the problem but the statement would not state the actual problem. Sometimes, students just described the situation

without problematizing it. Supervisors added that students did studies with no significance to academia; they did studies which did not solve any problem. A supervisor had this to say "they don't come up with problems. You find a proposal without a problem at all, just a statement without a problem". Another supervisor stated "I think most of the students do studies where the proposal does not state any problem at all". This is in line with Kikula and Quorro (2007) and Kombo and Tromp (2011) who in their respective studies found that proposal writers had weaknesses ranging from no problem, lack of clarity in the problem statement as well as problem statements without any clear focus. In addition, the REPOA report also noted that some proposals had problems which were irrelevant to the field of study and whose findings would not contribute any new knowledge. One supervisor said that some students conducted research where there was no problem. The question which needs to be addressed is' how do those proposals pass? One can assume that lecturers or proposal markers are lenient which academically speaking is not helpful both to the student and the field of academics where research is meant to unearth new information.

While all the mistakes can be summarised as students' ignorance, it appears that there are actually some mistakes which typifies students' ignorance. For example, Lecturers observed that masters students did not know what limitations to the study meant compared to challenges. They said that what students present as limitations were actually challenges. Supervisors stated that students need to be taught the difference between limitations and challenges because limitations had to do with design of the study. Another practical disability (ignorance) was how to articulate the epistemological and ontological considerations in the study. One lecturer noted that while lecturers taught about theoretical underpinnings, students wrote proposals without epistemological and ontological basis.

Another mistake had to do with poor literature review. Supervisors stated that instead of writing literature review in order to inform the study, students ended up answering their own research questions with their literature. In addition, students failed to identify gaps. They fail to discuss the literature, instead, they agree with every book they read. Most of the literature lacks the researcher's voice. One supervisor had this to say "they fail to write a proper literature review. You can't hear the researcher's voice and they just report other peoples' findings without saying how it relates to their study. It's a big problem". Another issue related to literature is that students have created a template which is in circulation. 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. Lecturers said it was not surprising that a lot of students had the same literature review word for word. This amounts to plagiarism. Many studies conducted have also reported poor literature review. Scribend.com (2013) reported inability to relate the study findings with the study as well as relying on secondary sources rather than primary sources and not critically examining the literature reviewed. Kikula and Quorro (2007) also found similar results. They reported that proposal writers did not take literature review seriously where (86%) of authors did not review the literature adequately. Problems identified included: inadequacy of literature reviewed (39%), lack of focus (16%), no review of literature at all (7%) and poor presentation of reviews (9%).

Wrong methodology was said to have been a common mistake by masters' students. Supervisors stated that students used methods and techniques without properly thinking of how they apply to the study. This means that students lack practical knowledge on how they can apply the knowledge learnt in class to the writing of the proposals. They sometimes give definitions in the methodology which are suspended without explaining how it relates to the study. Students have also created a template for the methodology where they just change the research area and how many people they will interview. Lecturers noted that it was the reason why there were many methodologies which mentioned methods and instruments which were not actually used because the student copied without even understanding. For example, one supervisor said "there

is a big problem with methodology. There is a template which students have created. You will see that almost all the proposals have the same background, literature review and methodology. They just edit it to suit their proposal". Another supervisor observed "students do not know the difference between qualitative and quantitative designs. They need help". Lecturers also observed that it is common that students claim that their study is a case study without an explanation of what qualifies the study to be a case study. This means that students lack knowledge of the parts of the proposal and how they can practically address what has to be done in each section of the proposal. Kikula and Quorro (2007) noted that the methodology section must clearly and thoroughly state how the data will address the research problem to meet the stated objectives. They however observed that the common mistake among proposal writers was clarity on how instruments and methods of data collection and analysis would be used to meet the objectives. Hence, Paul and Psych (2005) adds that since the method section tells the reader how you plan to tackle your research problem, it should contain sufficient and clear information for the reader to determine whether methodology is sound and the problem will be tackled adequately.

Plagiarim was mentioned as one of the common mistakes committed by students. Most supervisors complained that there was too much plagiarism among masters' students. It was reported that students had a tendency of quoting a scholar in the proposal but the full reference is not included in the reference section or the bibliography at the end of the proposal. This is exactly what National University of Malaysia (2008) also established in their study where the references cited in the text were not included in the reference section and vice versa. On plagiarism, lecturers at the University of Zambia suggested that students needed help on how they can write and avoid plagiarism since plagiarism is a serious academic offence. This agrees with Mhute (2013) who acknowledged plagiarism as a common problem among researchers but advised that it should be avoided as it is unethical and it is an issue which affects standards in academic writing.

The second objective was to establish challenges masters' students encounter when writing research proposals.

Masters students were asked to state the challenges which they encountered when writing a research proposal. The data was collected through focus group discussions. The following were their responses:

The first challenge was that there was no standard format for the structure of the proposal. Masters students stated that one of the biggest problems they encountered was that there is no common format as each lecturer had his/her own preferred format. They said that it was confusing and they did not know how to sequence the parts of a proposal because what was right to one supervisor was wrong to others who would in turn be examiners of the proposal. Students suggested that supervisors or DRGS should come up with a standard format outlining the structure of the proposal so that students are not victims of the different orientations which exist between and among supervisors. One student said "there is no format. Lecturers argue and each one has his own. Even them, if you ask them, they don't know the format. Each one has his own". Krathwohl (2005) noted that a proposal should have all the key elements involved in designing a complete research study and each component should be informative. However, while this doesn't seem to be the problem at UNZA, lecturers have diverse views and preferences on what elements should be included and which ones should not and in which order. There is need for lecturers and supervisors to realise that a proposal is supposed to be systematic and well-structured and that proposals in a particular field of study should certainly have a uniform format. Hence, there is urgent need to come up with a standard format to which every supervisor should adhere.

Most students reported that they had challenges identifying a gap in the literature review. They attributed this challenge to lack of guidance from supervisors. One respondent stated "we find problems to identify a gap in the literature review and even in the background section.

No single lecturer has provided guidelines on how to write literature review and how to bring out the gap". Another problem on literature review was that students had problems identifying relevant literature which should be included in the literature review section and which one was not.

Another challenge associated to lecturers is that most of them were not available for consultations. Students complained that they did not receive adequate help from lecturers and supervisors. They said that they sometimes got stack but lecturers were not available to offer help. Connected to the non-availability of lecturers was the complaint that some supervisors did not give feedback on time to their students once a student submitted a draft for the supervisor to go through and they claimed that some supervisors just packed the draft proposal without attending to it. Commenting on this issue, Richard and Gabrielle (1999:26) stated "timely feedback from supervisor is important in maintaining the momentum for the project and helping it stay in course. Supervisors definitely need to change their attitude.

In addition, another respondent stated "there is no one to see to consult to know if I am in the right direction or not…supervisors are also too busy for us". Richard, J and Gabrielle, B (1999) advised that supervisors should initiate regular contact with their students and provide high quality feedback. They added that regular contact was key to successful supervision. This means that School of Education supervisors at the University of Zambia have a responsibility to help their students throughout the process. In order to do this, there is need for supervisors to come up with a schedule of supervisory meetings with students as opposed to just having random and sudden contacts. In fact, when lecturers were interviewed on the same point, some of them complained that students were in the habit of spending long periods of time without doing their work, but wanted supervisors to work in a haste the moment they appeared. This simply confirms that a formal agreement outlining consultation dates and expectations should be agreed between supervisor and student which should be followed by both. Sharp and Howard (1996:159) in Lyn, V (2013) wrote the following about planning:

> *'Research supervision of postgraduate taught Masters Programmes should resist the temptation to proceed with its execution until an acceptable plan has been formulated', and that 'in large part, avoidable problems should be highlighted by the systematic planning process'.*

From the above quote, it can be reiterated that DRGS as well as Assistant Deans responsible for postgraduate studies should design agreement forms between supervisors and students which should be filled in and signed by a supervisor and a student as they embark on proposal writing until the completion of the masters' programme.

Another challenge which students encountered was negative comments from supervisors. They said that supervisors sometime wrote comments in the draft proposal which lack detail and students were left confused about what they needed to do. For example, students stated that sometimes, supervisors just underlined a sentence or the whole paragraph without writing what was wrong with the underlined part. Other comments included 'recast' or 'rephrase' without properly indicating where the mistake is or what has gone wrong with the current construction. Further, masters students said that there were even negative comments where supervisors simply wrote, 'this is nonsense', 'wrong', 'you are not serious', 'bad English'. Students stated that such comments were very discouraging but also lacked guidance as they were reprimands in nature. It is clear that supervisors seems to be at loss with their professional responsibility in supervision. That is the reason why writing on effective supervisors, Richard and Gabrielle (1999) advised supervisors to be encouraging and have the students' interests at heart. Further, they also urged supervisors to be giving sound and unambiguous instructions to their students in the course of supervision.

It was anonymously stated by the masters students that stating the problem of the study was a big challenge. They said that whenever they wrote their statement of the problem, supervisors

told them that they lacked the problem or that the statement of the problem did not state the problem which the study intended to solve. Students appealed to lecturers to teach them how to identify and state the problem of the study clearly.

In addition, another challenge related to the previous one is that the Directorate of Research and Graduate Studies did not make follow ups with what was happening in the schools. At the school level, the assistant Dean- Postgraduate did not make follow up with lecturers no matter how long a lecturer took to mark a proposal. Lecturers were left to work at their pace no matter how this affected the progress of the student. One student had this to say "lecturers are their own bosses. It's like they don't have a boss. They do things whenever they want". Since DRGS works hand in hand with the office of the Assistant Dean- Postgraduate, it is easy to assume that the two offices should have a system of follow ups on the lecturers. If effective supervision is to be achieved, there is need for time lines on how long one can take to mark a proposal. Based on the data from the students, one can argue that DRGS and School of Education have ineffective structures in which supervisors set their own deadlines with the student as a victim.

The time to write proposal was said not to be adequate and this possess a challenge in coming up with a quality proposal. Students put it to us that they spent time learning and they were told time for proposal writing would come and that when they were asked to start writing the proposal, there was little time remaining for them to write good proposals with good literature review. They were of the view that proposal writing should start immediately a student started the programme and the supervisor should also be assigned immediately. Coupled with this challenge is lack of reading materials. However, the university has a duty to acquire new books and journals, students can do personal research and access reading materials. In an era where most books and journal articles are online, students can easily search and download published books and articles. Hence, this complaint confirms what lecturers said about lack of reading/research among students.

The third objective was to assess the grades which students obtained in proposal writing

Selected proposals which had been marked were sampled and reviewed. The aim was to establish the grades which examiners gave students for proposal writing and to see the quality of the proposals written by masters' students. In other words, we wanted to establish the performance of the masers students in proposal writing. The following were the observations which came out of the document analysis:

- Among the proposals which were reviewed and analysed, the lowest grade was 65% while the highest grade was 78%.
- Titles were unclear and lacked focus
- The backgrounds of the study were often too general and lacked focus
- The statement of the problem was usually not properly stated. In some cases. There was no problem at all.
- Research objectives and questions were usually not properly phrased
- Clarity of writing was a problem and was compounded with numerous grammatical mistakes
- All the proposals which were reviewed contained all the three general parts i.e Introduction, Literature Review and Methodology.

From the above observations, it can be concluded that considering the quality of the proposals which were reviewed, marking and awarding of marks was very generous and lenient. This is not only unprofessional on the part of the markers but unhelpful to the students because they were given high marks for bad work. There is need for examiners to give marks which as much as possible should reflect the quality of the work in the proposal. Supervisors may also need to be reminded that marking is one way of teaching. The mark which a student scores makes him or her work towards

improvement or maintain the attitude. Marking should therefore, be as objective as possible.

The fourth Objective was to solicit for suggestions on what can be done to improve the way the masters research course (Proposal Writing) should be handled.

Both supervisors and students were asked what they thought were some of the things which should be done in order to eradicate or minimise the mistakes committed and challenges encountered when writing a proposal. The following were the suggestions:

- The EDR course should be practical. There should be a hands-on approach in the way research methods and proposal writing should be taught to students. This will help clarify all the weaknesses which students exhibited.

- There should be a standard format for the structure of the proposal. This will eradicate the confusion and tensions among lecturers on one hand and students on the other hand.

- There should be a very strong research course at undergraduate in all the programmes so that the EDR at master's level should not be completely strange to students. In other words, since most students enrolling for masters lack background in research, the school should design research courses to provide a strong research background which would be a foundation for EDR.

- There should be a postgraduate library and the school should buy relevant books and articles o help students with materials. The library should also have internet and enough computers so that students have a conducive environment for research.

- When teaching the EDR course, lecturers in charge should teach students on how they can refer to someone's work without plagiarism. For example, student can be given a practical exercise where students are given an article to read and ask them to paraphrase it. Such exercises will help students avoid plagiarism which they believed was not academic.

- Students should be given more time in which to write the proposal. Proposal writing should start immediately students begin their course and supervisors should be allocated immediately so that they can start working with students ahead of time.

- The relationship between supervisors and students should be formalised. At the moment, this relationship is private and exists only between the supervisor and the students. This resulted into either the supervisor not being or the students not showing commitment to the whole process.

- There should be control over how many students one supervisor can take at a time. This will ensure quality.

- The office of the assistant Dean, Postgraduate should exercise powers over supervisors and examiners. At the moment, supervisors are untouchable and when they take too long to supervise or mark proposals, there is no follow up by the office of the assistant Dean- Postgraduate.

- Departments should come up with research areas from which students should select topics.

- Supervisors should be writing clear, helpful and positive comments in draft proposals as well as during examination of proposals.

CONCLUSION

From the findings, there are a number of mistakes committed by students and challenges faced by postgraduate students at the University of Zambia. As for the mistakes the following featured prominently; unclear topics, unclear statement of the problem, ignorance about research limitations, none inclusion of philosophical concepts (proposal not theorised), poor literature review, inappropriate methodology and plagiarism.

As for the challenges, students encountered the following: absence of a standard proposal format, identification of gaps in literature review, identification of appropriate literature to be reviewed, supervisors not available for consultations, irregular feedback from supervisors, inadequate

feedback from supervisors, inadequate reading materials, supervisors are not themselves supervised to do a good job and time allocated for proposal writing was inadequate.

It is therefore, important that the School attends to the above so that research proposals of good quality are produced which will culminate into a good research because a proposal is the foundation of a research. A weak foundation will lead to a bad research.

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AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHY

Peter Chomba Manchishi is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Language and Social Sciences Education, in the School of Education at the University of Zambia. He holds a PhD, MA and BA in Applied Linguistics from the University of Franche-Comté at Besancon in France. He also has a Diploma in Education from Nkrumah Teachers' College. His research interests are in Language and teacher education.

Dr. Daniel Ndhlovu is a lecturer in the Department of Educational Psychology, Sociology and Special Education at the University of Zambia. He is also the current Assistant Dean Postgraduate in the School of Education at the University of Zambia. He holds a PhD, Masters and Bachelor's Degrees in Special Education from the University of Zambia. He also has a Secondary School Teachers' Diploma and a Guidance, Counselling and Placement Diploma.He has 30 years experience in teaching and lecturing at secondary school, college and university levels of education. As a supervisor of postgraduate students and lecturer, he has a distinguished record of mentorship. In addition, he is a researcher and consultant in education, special education, guidance and counselling, early childhood education and HIV and AIDS related issues.

Mr. David Sani Mwanza is a Lecturer of English Teaching Methods at the University of Zambia. He obtained a Bachelor's Degree with a major in Linguistics and African Languages. His Master's Degree is in Literacy and Learning. He is now a PhD researcher at the University of Western Cape, South Africa. His research interests include Teacher education, language teaching, language policy, Education policy and Sociolinguistics.