Developing a research proposal

OVERVIEW

In the life of a research student there are several milestones such as defending your research proposal, or submitting the thesis. This resource is concerned with one of the earliest milestones in thesis writing: developing a research proposal. The suggestions made in this unit have relevance for undergraduate Honours students, as well as Masters and doctoral students starting out on research.

Developing a topic

The task of establishing a suitable topic is often a significant hurdle. While supervisors in some departments may suggest topics, other supervisors expect students to have quite a clear idea of the thesis topic before the preliminary supervision discussions take place. In fact, students are expected to submit a preliminary research proposal as part of the admission process.

For students who have had a break from university studies, establishing a broad topic area or even a potential topic is a process that should begin well before you enroll. It involves reading in your area of research interest, thinking, discussing and, attending related seminars or conferences. These activities encourage contemplation, and can assist in fostering ideas. For students who know the general topic area they wish to research, reading widely in the area of interest will help to identify research issues, or questions that need further investigation. The process of developing a topic is ultimately one of establishing a gap in current research that a thesis could aim to address.

If you have made an appointment with an academic to discuss research topics, keep in mind that the discussion will be most fruitful if you are prepared. The academic will most likely ask you about your research interests, particular aspects of those research interests, your familiarity with the literature, and so on. It may be helpful to give the academic an outline of your research interests before your meeting. The academic is unlikely to *give* you a topic, but through discussion can help you to come up with your own. Furthermore, discussions with the academic should assist you in refining an existing topic, or to establish a research space in the current research in the field.

Once you are closer to establishing your topic, you need to address a number of issues to make sure your intended topic is suitable. This process may lead you to further refine your topic, but hopefully not abandon it. It is important that early in your candidature the following issues are addressed.

SUPERVISION

The process of selecting a supervisor is a significant hurdle in itself. While some departments may allocate you a supervisor, it is very helpful if you have in mind the person you think would be most suitable.

Departments are keen to attract research students, so it is worth your while to make appointments, and speak to various people about supervision. Remember too when looking for a supervisor, to consider questions of availability, expertise, and personality.

DATA

If your project involves collecting data from human participants, you must be sure at the outset that you will be able to establish your cohort and have the participation of enough subjects to carry out the study. Your supervisor will guide you in preparing an application to the University's Human Research Ethics Committee. The Ethics Officer at the University's Research Office can advise you when the Ethics Committee meets to discuss applications. This is generally on a monthly basis. Application forms are available at the Research Office or can be downloaded from the University's web site.

LEVEL OF INTEREST AND COMMITMENT

An important question is whether your topic can sustain your interest for a long period. For full-time doctoral students this means approximately three years. You should find your topic challenging and exciting.

BUDGET

Budgetary considerations are important for students who generally have limited access to funds. What equipment do you need for your study? Is it available in your department? What facilities are available for research students in your department (*shared computers? a desk? access to a printer? limited access to interlibrary loans?* etc). Will you need to travel to carry out field studies? These are some of the questions you should consider, and your supervisor may be able to offer advice on additional funding sources.

At the University of Wollongong post graduate research students can apply for financial assistance to attend a national or international conference, at which the student is presenting a paper. Students are only entitled to this assistance once in their candidature. Faculties also receive funding for their post graduate research students. You should ask your faculty's post graduate officer if any financial assistance is available.

Finally, an important consideration in developing your topic is whether your chosen topic is a significant one. For PhD candidates, their research is required to make an original contribution to their field of study. For this reason it is necessary to establish a gap or space in the field of enquiry which your research will seek to fill. Another consideration for research students is will fellow researchers find the chosen topic interesting and relevant? While this is a difficult question to gauge for a beginning researcher, a well-chosen topic can result in attracting the interest of other researchers, or relevant parties — an outcome which will make your candidature as a research student more enjoyable and hopefully fruitful.

Preparing the research proposal

Most faculties require students to submit a research proposal before they can begin their research project. Expectations vary across disciplines, so check carefully with your Faculty or supervisor for their guidelines for research students.

The main components of a research proposal are a clear statement of the problem to be investigated, a brief literature review highlighting the gap in current knowledge that your research addresses, the scope, aims and objectives of your research, the proposed methodology and data analysis, and the implications of the research. Preparing a research proposal forces you to consider project design issues early on, and to think through potential problems. Presenting your research proposal to department or faculty members is a valuable opportunity for you to receive constructive feedback on your project from experienced researchers.

Every faculty has its specific expections of the research proposal. Please check these carefully before you begin preparing your document.

STRUCTURE OF THE RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Depending on the scope of your research proposal, not all of the following need be included in your proposal. It is also possible to combine some sections, or change the order. The development of your research proposal will be in consultation with your supervisor, and the inclusions will vary by discipline, but generally, expect to have:

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(a) Title page: This should include the title of your project; your name and student number; your department or faculty; the name of the degree sought; the names of your supervisors, and the date of submission. Ideally, a title should not be more than 15 words in length.

(b) Abstract: this should include the problem under investigation; the research methodology and theoretical orientation; and the expected outcomes and implications of the research.

(c) Table of Contents: the inclusion of a table of contents will depend on the scope of your research proposal.

(d) Introduction: depending on the scope of your proposal, the introduction will contain a number of sub-sections, such as;

— background to the study
— the significance of the study/ aims and significance of the study (why is it important to solve the problem)
— the statement of the problem
— research questions and hypotheses
— definitions.

(e) Literature Review: provides the rationale for your research topic. It should give an overview of the current research on the topic area. It should identify a gap in the research. This is important because it shows why your topic is important. The literature review should also review relevant methodologies, which show how your research is to be done.

(f) Research design / Methodology: this section will include a number of sub- sections. It should describe the type of study you propose to do as well as how you propose to do it. You need to describe your participants/subjects, your data collection procedure and method of data analysis, as well as the limitations of your project.

(g) Proposed timeframe

(h) Expected outcomes: what you hope to achieve

(i) References: a full list of all references cited in your proposal. Check with your faculty for preferred referencing conventions.

Depending on your faculty you may also include a description of any pilot studies which have been undertaken. Some departments also prefer the research questions and hypothesis to follow the literature review. It may also be advisable to include a section on your theoretical orientation. If your research involves human participants you may need to include a section on ethical considerations. These issues need to be clarified with your supervisor.

The following sample research proposal has been annotated to highlight some of the elements that a research proposal needs to adequately give an overview of the proposed thesis topic. The requirements for research proposals will vary for different disciplines, but the elements in this example are fairly typical. Excerpts are from Paul Ikutegbe's Research Proposal (UOW, 2019) and presented with his permission. We thank him for kindly sharing his work with us.

Further reading:

Gruba, P and Zobel, J (2017) How to write your first thesis, University of Melbourne, Melbourne.

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Example: Research proposal (in brief)

TItle

Developing a theoretical model of successful work placements for people with disabilities

The title identifies and introduces the topic.

Abstract

The purpose of the proposed study is to explore the factors that predict successful work outcomes for people with disabilities in mainstream employment. The proposed study will use Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and a mixed methods approach. Stage 1 of the proposed study will involve 60 semi-structured in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of 30 school leavers with disabilities and 30 employers with varying experiences in hiring people with disabilities. The outcome for Stage 1 will be a theoretical model of successful work placements for people with disabilities in mainstream employment. Stage 2 will empirically validate the model developed in Stage 1. Stage 2 will involve a survey of 1,000 school leavers with disabilities who completed the Transition to Work program of the NSW Department of Communities and Justice. Insights from an initial scoping review of relevant literature suggests that successful employment outcomes are influenced by (1) supply-side, (2) demand-side, and (3) environmental factors. Gaps in the current knowledge base include a lack of (1) multidisciplinary and theoretically based studies; (2) longitudinal studies which measure actual work outcomes; and (3) holistic approaches to predicting successful employment outcomes. The proposed study will make theoretical and practical contributions that will be useful to various stakeholders in the area of disability employment.

Aim of the study.

The proposed theory used in the thesis

Methodology and the phases of research

Statement about gaps in the current knowledge

Statement about contribution of the study

1. Introduction

1.1   Background

An estimated 785 million people of working age (15-64 years) have a disability, equating to 15.6% of the global population (Cavanagh et al 2017). As age increases so does the likelihood of acquiring a disability (Vornholt et al 2018). As the population ages and people work longer, the incidence of disability within the population is also expected to increase over time (Vornholt et al 2018).

Introduction to the problem using relevant, published statistics

In the Australian workforce, this phenomenon is evident and concerning because people with disability are already underrepresented in employment (Council of Small Business Organisations Australia 2018). The workforce participation rate of people with disabilities is substantially lower (53%) than their able-bodied counterparts (83%), and this gap has not changed considerably over the past two decades (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015). In contrast to people without disabilities, people with disabilities are more likely to experience extended periods of underemployment and unemployment (Van Bueren et al 2017).

Move to the specific-Australian context

The underrepresentation of people with disabilities in mainstream employment is an important issue for management scholars because businesses are not harnessing the potential benefits of recruiting from this overlooked pool of labour. Such benefits include: (1) broader access to and retention of skilled labour; (2) positive effects on workplace harmony; (3) improved innovation capability; and (4) enhanced company image and reputation (Van Bueren et al 2017) ...

Further details of the problem

The problem statement and why it is important to solve the problem

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Example: Research proposal (in brief)

1.2   Research problem

People with disabilities face significant and complex barriers to full workforce participation in Australia. One such barrier is ongoing and systemic employment discrimination; which is "underpinned by negative assumptions and attitudes that are held by many employers and throughout the community about the productivity and capability of people with disability" (Australian Human Rights Commission 2016, p 12). Failure to address the negative attitudes held by employers, and their unwillingness to recruit people with disabilities, potentially jeopardises the projected economic and social benefits of the NDIS...

1.3   Research questions

The proposed study aims to explore the factors that predict successful work outcomes for people with disabilities in mainstream employment. It will achieve this by answering the following questions:

Researchable questions

1.3.1 What are the barriers and enablers of successful disability employment outcomes as identified in the extant literature?

1.3.2 What are the experiences of school leavers with disabilities classified as eligible to work and employers in mainstream employment?

1.3.3 How can the above factors be used to develop and test a theoretical model of successful work placements for people with disabilities?

1.4   Contributions

The proposed study offers both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretical contributions include:

Statement of contribution the thesis proposes to make

(1)   The development of a theoretical model to predict successful employment outcomes for people with disability;

(2)   Identification of sources of employer heterogeneity in relation to hiring people with disabilities; and

(3)   Extension of the Ecological Systems framework to show how factors at different levels combine to support successful mainstream employment outcomes for people with disabilities ...

2. Scope of the literature review

The literature review was guided by certain search and selection criteria, and the scope is explained according to: (1) the review period; (2) the mainstream employment context; (3) the definition of disability; and (4) the predictors of successful employment outcomes.

Outline of the strands of literature overviewed

2.1   Review period

The majority of the literature included in the review were peer-reviewed empirical studies and reviews, published in English, from 2001-2019. The review period reflects the timeframe after the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) model was endorsed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 2001. The ICF model is a universally accepted and multipurpose classification system, used for the measurement and conceptualisation of health and disability (WHO, 2018). The ICF model sees disability as dependent "on the dynamic relationship of a person's health impairment and contextual factors" (Vornholt et al 2018, p 42).

Clearly defined period of the literature being reviewed

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Example: Research proposal (in brief)

2.2   Mainstream employment context

The literature review was limited to studies on the experiences of people with disability in mainstream employment. Mainstream employment, sometimes called open or competitive employment (Brotherton et al 2016), refers to "work in the regular workforce for which workers with disability receive wages and conditions of employment commensurate with workers without disability" (Cheng et al 2018, p 318) …

Overview of the main theme in the literature

2.3   Definition of disability

There are various models by which disability is defined, but the two most commonly recognised models are: (1) the medical model of disability, and (2) the social model of disability (Jones et al 2014). The medical (or traditional) model of disability views disability as an impairment related to the physical or mental state of the individual, which is the reason for the barriers and social exclusion experienced by the individual (Islam 2015; Wynne & McAnaney 2004). However, the medical model of disability fails to account for the contextual aspects which contribute to the social exclusion of people with disabilities …

The definition of key terms in the thesis

3. Literature review

3.1.1   Introduction

In order to address research sub-question 1.3.1: "What are the barriers and enablers of successful disability employment outcomes as identified in the extant literature?" this section presents the preliminary scoping review seeking to inform the development of a theoretical model to depict successful mainstream employment outcomes for people with disabilities. Three key themes emerged during the review: (1) supply-side predictors; (2) demand-side predictors; and (3) environmental predictors. The factors, or characteristics, that will now be discussed under each theme are interlinked and interact with each other to determine the employment outcomes of people with disabilities.

Key themes of the literature reviewed are presented

Disability is a heterogeneous concept and its nature is an important determinant of the way the person with disability is perceived and treated by others (Smith et al 2017; Stone & Colella 1996). Some disability-types are more prone to stigma and discrimination than others. People with physical disabilities are more likely to be treated favourably by others than those with intellectual or mental health disability (Gewurtz et al 2016).

Overview of some studies in one strand of the literature

An American study found that people with physical (mobility impairments) and mental or cognitive disabilities are more at risk of job loss than individuals with vision or hearing impairments (Mitra & Kruse 2016). This is due to the visibility of the disability and the level of stigma attached to each disability-type. A Canadian study into pay discrimination experienced by people with disabilities also found that certain disability-types or health limitations (mobility, memory and emotional) negatively affect pay outcomes (Gunderson & Lee 2016).

There is some disagreement in the literature regarding the influence of the duration of disability on employment outcomes …

Statement about the controversies in the strand of literature overviewed

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Example: Research proposal (in brief)

3.1.2   Socioeconomic/demographic factors

Prior studies suggest that the employment outcomes of people with disability are influenced by socioeconomic and demographic factors, such as: (1) location of residence, (2) income level, (3) gender, and (4) level of education (Grigal et al 2011; Kulkarni et al 2016; Lindsay 2011). Persons with disability who reside in rural locations are less likely to obtain successful employment outcomes than their peers in urban locations (Kulkarni et al 2016; Östlund & Johansson 2018). This is due to insufficient jobs and workplace accommodations in rural centres. Location of residence also impacts access to funding needed by people with disability to fully participate in society (Reddihough et al 2016). Young adults with disability from low income backgrounds are less likely to receive positive employment outcomes than their peers with similar disability, due to inadequate social capital (such as skills, knowledge and resources), critical for workplace integration (Lindsay 2011).

Review of literature in another strand

Gender has been debated extensively in the literature regarding the employment of people with disability ...

Discussion on the debates in the field.

The full literature review has not been included here. The rest of the literature review takes up each strand of literature and compares, contrasts and critically examines relevant prior studies. The literature review section ends with a discussion of the gap in the literature that the proposed study will fill. A short excerpt is presented below.

4. Knowledge gaps

The review of literature has revealed opportunities to develop a better understanding of the factors that contribute to successful mainstream employment outcomes for people with disabilities. The key weaknesses of existing research studies include a lack of (1) multidisciplinary and theoretically based studies; (2) longitudinal studies which measure actual work outcomes; and (3) holistic approaches to understanding factors that facilitate successful employment outcomes for people with disabilities....

Identification of gaps in the literature

5. Theoretical foundations and conceptual model

The social model of disability views disability as a consequence of the interaction between the person with disability and the contextual environment they are embedded. This view supports the need to adopt a holistic approach to understanding factors that facilitate successful mainstream employment outcomes for people with disabilities.

Discussion of the theoretical framework and justification for it.

In addition, the proposed study draws on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory to inform the development of a conceptual model to predict successful employment outcomes for people with disability...

The full theoretical framework section has not been included here. The section provides a clear overview of the theory/theories that will be used. A good diagram helped to illustrate how the theory links to the study.

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6.   Research design

A mixed methods approach will be adopted in the proposed study. This approach "involves the collection or analysis of both quantitative and/or qualitative data in a single study in which the data are collected concurrently or sequentially, are given a priority, and involve the integration of the data at one or more stages in the process of research" (Clark & Creswell 2008, p 165).

Discussion of the research method

Specifically, an exploratory sequential or two-phase design will be used, in which the qualitative phase of the study is conducted first (Stage 1) and the quantitative phase is conducted second (Stage 2) (Creswell 2015). Stage 1 will develop a theoretical model of successful employment outcomes for people with disabilities. Stage 2 will empirically validate the theoretical model developed in Stage 1. Figure 2 is a graphical illustration of the research design of the proposed study …

The complete section has not been included here.

Research feasibility and timeline …

The proposed study is a PhD by publication and it is fully funded by an ARC Linkage grant with the NSW Department of Communities and Justice. The project will be conducted as per the timeline below:

Timeline

Action	2019		2020				2021				2022	
	Qtr 3	Qtr 4	Qtr 1	Qtr 2	Qtr 3	Qtr 4	Qtr 1	Qtr 2	Qtr 3	Qtr 4	Qtr 1	Qtr 2
Literature review	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■		
Research proposal review (RPR)		■										
HREC amendment		■										
In-depth interviews			■	■								
Qualitative data analysis				■	■							
Theoretical model development				■	■							
Measures development and testing						■						
Data collection							■	■				
Quantitative data analysis								■	■			
Thesis writing									■	■	■	
Findings dissemination (publications/conferences)												
1st publication			■									
2nd publication						■						
3rd publication											■	

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