

IMPROVING RESEARCH METHODOLOGY TEACHING: INSIGHTS FROM EXAMINERS' EVALUATIONS OF MASTER'S RESEARCH PROPOSALS

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(Received 18th March 2026; revised 26th June 2026; accepted 28th July 2026)

Abstract. Developing a coherent research proposal is a cornerstone requirement of postgraduate research training. Nevertheless, several master's students have encountered challenges in writing research proposals of acceptable academic quality. The purpose of this study will be to find common weak aspects of master's research proposal and to get insights into the inherent challenges that students encounter during the proposal development process. Through a qualitative document analysis method, this paper analysed reports by examiners and advisors on 21 research proposals written by students undertaking a master's in business economics course. The reports included critical analysis of some of the components of the proposal, such as the title, abstract, problem statement, research objectives, scope of the research, literature review, research methodology, and reference. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the examiner comments in order to determine common trends of weaknesses. The results demonstrate the existence of six key themes, namely, the ambiguous formulation of a research problem, lack of correspondence between research elements, a weak theoretical background, descriptive and unsynthesised literature review practices, methodological confusion and excessive complexity, and deficiencies in structured academic writing. The findings indicate that weaknesses in research proposals are not merely isolated writing issues; rather, they are indicators of larger deficiencies in the conceptualisation of research, the research design, and the students' academic writing abilities. The study identifies a necessity of more systematic pedagogical strategies of teaching research methodology to postgraduate students, especially in building research logic, skills of literature synthesis and justification of methods.

Keywords: *research methodology, research proposal, postgraduate research, teaching and learning, academic quality*

Introduction

The skill of structuring and presenting an effective research proposal is a basic prerequisite in postgraduate studies. A research proposal serves as a conceptual and methodological outline for a project, demonstrating the student's ability to understand concepts related to research conceptualisation, engagement with literature, and research design. Research proposal writing, therefore, is a common learning outcome in research methodology instruction, as well as a valuable measure of the student being ready to pursue independent research (Saeed et al., 2021). A well-crafted research proposal entails students combining all or most of the competencies mentioned above, i.e., recognising research problems and questions, synthesising relevant literature, and choosing suitable methodological strategies. Regardless of its significance, various works reveal that postgraduate students often face significant challenges when writing research proposals. These issues extend beyond mere writing mechanics and typically stem from more pressing issues of conceptualising research, research literacy, and methodological rationality. As an illustration, Badenhorst (2021) notes that research conceptualisation is more so due to the fact that it involves master and doctoral students,

who have to employ higher levels of academic literacies, such as the capacity to recognise gaps in research and generate research-beneficial problems. Equally, Leo (2019) discovered that graduate students tend to lack tools on how to justify the background sufficiently, detect research gaps, and subjectively assess literature gaps when writing research proposals.

The development of research questions and problem statements is one of the most frequently mentioned challenges. Research questions are very critical to directing the research process and determining things about the research design, data collection and analysis. Nevertheless, postgraduate students may face the difficulty of narrowing down research questions so that they can be relevant and achievable academically. According to Ibrahim and Alnajar (2025), a broad, generalised approach to research questions often gives rise to wider methodological and justification issues in the research proposals. This challenge is usually exacerbated by the fact that students have little experience in the critical assessment of literature and the ability to determine the presence of research gaps (Badenhorst, 2021; Pietersen, 2014; Albright et al., 2012; Brown, 2007). Besides the conceptual issues, postgraduate students also tend to have problems in the coordination of various parts of a research proposal. A coherent research proposal must align the following elements: the research problem, research questions, theoretical framework, and methodology. However, studies indicate that learners often find it difficult to align these elements. According to Pietersen (2014), several master students lose logical progression throughout the sections of proposals, as well as not having a real notion about how various parts of the proposal are connected to each other. On the same note, Christ (2009) suggests that postgraduate students usually struggle to comprehend the relationship between the purpose of research, research questions, and methodological approaches, especially in the initial stages of writing research proposals.

The other significant issue is the creation of a strong literature review. Effective literature review entails studies that need the conducting student to critically assess and synthesise the existing studies with the aim of developing the theoretical and empirical base of the study. Nevertheless, students tend not to go beyond summarising past research. According to Badenhorst (2021), determining research gaps needs complex academic literacy levels, and Leo (2019) lists that in many cases, students do not conduct rigorous literature reviews or use source findings to inform their propositions. Research literacy studies also reflect the multidimensional nature of these issues. Yang et al. (2024) introduce research literacy as a skill of enquiring about problems, applying methods of research, arguing scholarly points, and exercising the right research attitudes. Their findings suggest that the majority of postgraduate students report moderate levels of research competence yet continue to encounter difficulties with significant research tasks, such as identifying research gaps, constructing arguments, and addressing scholarly enquiries (Yang et al., 2026). These difficulties mean that there is a disjunction between the perceived research competence and the real competence of the students to design and justify research proposals. Whereas earlier research has established several challenges in writing research proposals for postgraduate students, a larger portion of the research available thus far has been based on student perceptions, surveys, or interviews. These issues have been relatively under-researched because there has been little analysis of examiners' or reviewers' reactions to research proposals. The examiner reports are valuable since they indicate professional judgements in academics on the strengths and weaknesses of the proposals by students. An analysis of such reports can consequently be more insightful about the particular

problems that influence the quality of postgraduate research proposals, such as inadequate literature reviews, unclear research questions, or insufficient methodological rigour.

To address this gap, the current study considers examiner reports on the master of research proposal written by students on a business economics programme. This study aims to determine common weaknesses in the research proposals of learners and to gain deeper insights into challenges that postgraduate students are likely to experience when developing their proposals by analysing written advice given by advisors and examiners. In particular, this research will approach the following research questions: (1) To identify repeated weaknesses in the master's research proposal, as outlined in the reports from the examiner and advisor; (2) To investigate the areas of research proposals that present the most challenges to students pursuing a master's in a business economics program; (3) To assess what examiner feedback can tell us about the conceptualisation of research, research design and academic writing skills gaps in students. The systematic analysis of examiner reports conducted in the present study corpus makes a contribution to the literature on postgraduate research education by giving the empirical evidence on the issues that are specifically faced by master's students when writing the research proposals. Postgraduate programmes are likely to use the discovery to amend their teaching approaches to research and proposal writing.

Materials and Methods

A qualitative document analysis design was adopted in this study to analyse the most common weaknesses in master-level research proposals forwarded by students in the Business Economics programme. The analysed documents included 21 examiner correction reports that contained written comments about students' research proposals from both Advisor, Examiner 1, and Examiner 2. These reports were considered to be the main source of data, as they already included the direct evaluative remarks on the quality of the proposals of the students in terms of the main proposal aspects like title, abstract, problem statement, research objectives, scope of research, literature review, and methodology. Examiner reports are pertinent in the use of data since the comments are made as a result of a formal academic assessment and thus portray genuine concerns about the research writing of students, their conceptual comprehension, and their competence as researchers. Rather than relying on student self-perception, the research focused on the evidence found in the records that highlighted weaknesses identified by academic evaluators. In the reports, common remarks were the lack of abstracts, poor problem statements, weak research gaps, lack of compatibility between research questions and objectives, weak theoretical background, descriptive literature review, broad scope, and lack of clarity on methods.

The focus of the study was on the individual comments made by examiners or advisors regarding the written feedback. The reports were repeated and analysed through thematic analysis. First, all the comments were prepared and categorised based on the section of the proposal that they addressed. Second, codes were coded with recurring problems, which included, but were not limited to, missing abstracts, unclear gaps, overlapping objectives, lack of theory, AI-like writing, weak literature synthesis, and methodological overcomplexity. Third, similar codes were grouped in broad groups in an attempt to detect weak areas across the dataset. Lastly, these categories were narrowed down to broad themes that encompassed the greatest issues master's students

encountered when preparing research proposals. The coding process was focused on repetition, concern for consistency within examiners and convergent comments on several reports to promote trustworthiness. A theme was kept when multiple students had similar weaknesses in the proposal. The analysis revealed that the weak points were not accidental or unique but rather indicative of a systemic issue. They might be grouped into bigger themes: conceptual framing, compatibility of research elements, theoretical base, strength of the literature review, comprehension of methodology, and structure of academic writing. The current study is not intended as an assessment of individual students, although it will assist in revealing common learning challenges to make an improvement to the instruction and guidance of research methodology at the master's level.

Results and Discussion

A qualitative analysis has shown that there are a number of constant weaknesses in master's research proposals. The examiner's comments consistently highlighted structural, conceptual, and methodological concerns evident in several proposals. The weaknesses were not limited to specific students; they appeared in various reports multiple times, suggesting that there were systemic issues in the development of research proposals by students. The analysis indicated that six key themes were identified, which are as follows: (1) the inability to establish a clear research problem, (2) a mismatch within the components of the research, (3) lack of substantiation of the theoretical basis, (4) descriptive literature review practices, (5) methodological confusion and overcomplexity, and (6) structural and academic writing deficiencies.

Difficulty in framing a clear research problem

One of the most frequent issues identified by examiners was the lack of a clearly articulated research problem. Examiners commonly encountered a clearly stated research problem and research gap. A considerable number of students could present a compelling topic area, but the proposals tended to lack what particular gap in the literature the study sought to solve. Examiners repeatedly reported that problem statements were more general economic or policy problems than clearly defined researchable academic problems. In some instances, the reviewers noted that the problem statement did not have adequate empirical support or substantiation to determine the urgency and relevancy of the study. For example, examiner feedback indicated that the problem statement needed to be improved to clearly outline the research problem and justify the rationale for conducting the research. Similarly, other reports made similar observations that the problem statement indicated more of a policy briefing than an academic research argument, which suggests that the students might find it difficult distinguishing the description of a societal issue and a researchable scholarly question. This tendency suggests that the students may have a general understanding of the subject matter they wish to investigate, but they struggle to define a clear research gap based on the existing literature.

Misalignment between research questions, objectives, and methods

Another recurring weakness identified in the reports is the failure to correlate various elements of the research proposal, particularly the research questions, research

objectives, variables, and methodology. Examiners often mentioned that research questions and objectives were repetitive, overlapping, or not logically related. In other instances, research objectives merely paraphrased the research questions without defining the specific focus of analysis or variables under analysis. Examiner remarks indicated the lack of specificity and clarity of research questions and objectives and the fact that some of them duplicated others without a distinct purpose. Moreover, the examiners noted that the research design or methodology did not necessarily reflect the relationships among the variables addressed in the literature review. Such misalignment implies that there are students who consider every chapter of the proposal as a standalone entity instead of part of a whole research design. The incoherence of the proposal sections suggests that the students might have little experience with building a coherent research structure.

Insufficient theoretical grounding

Another theme that crops up during the analysis is the lack of or poor implementation of theoretic frameworks in proposals made by the students. Numerous examiner reports underscored that the theory did not satisfactorily support the proposed relationships between variables. In other instances, the literature review section was a descriptive summary of past studies, but it failed to clearly indicate the theoretical basis that warrants the relationships examined in the empirical model. Feedback provided by the examiners clearly stated that there were studies which lacked the theoretical basis needed to support the proposed associations between variables. The research design seems conceptually weak without a clear theoretical underpinning since the variables and the hypotheses are not supported with a background of theoretical arguments. This result indicates that students might have limited exposure to theoretical reasoning, or they might struggle to relate theoretical frameworks and empirical research design.

Descriptive and unsynthesised literature reviews

The review also found that there are rampant deficiencies in the literature review writing, especially on the part of synthesis and critical analysis. It was often mentioned by examiners that the literature reviews were largely descriptive, where the reviews included summaries of individual studies instead of analytical synthesis. Some examiner reports noted the lack of critical reviews of research and suggested that students should be more effective in the synthesis of literature instead of presenting a list of unrelated research results. Other reports also reported that literature reviews were at times too abstract or too broad conceptually without making a clear connection with the literature and the variables applied in the empirical model. In other instances, the referenced literature was old, irrelevant to the topic, and not based on academic sources. These results indicate that students might experience challenges in strategically using literature to construct a coherent argument, identify research gaps, and rationalise the research framework offered.

Methodological confusion and overcomplexity

The other significant theme that comes out of examiner reports is associated with confusion in the method and improper research design. Comments often mentioned by examiners were that students suggested statistical methods or econometric models without a clear explanation as to why they were considered methodologically

appropriate. Examiners have occasionally stated that the chosen estimators or analysis methods lacked relevant diagnostic testing and theoretical support. As an illustration, remarks have shown that some econometric procedures had been chosen without explaining their suitability to the data or research aim. Furthermore, other proposals tried to use more than one complex econometric method in one study, which examiners found unrealistic due to possible data and the range of a master's research project. In such situations, examiners suggested that the methodology be simplified so that the research design proposed was workable. Such observations imply that certain students might confuse the methodological complexity with academic rigour, and they might offer methods which are beyond their conceptual grasp or the practical constraints of an available dataset.

Structural and academic writing deficiencies

Lastly, the analysis indicated that the proposals had several structural and academic writing problems. The identified problems include incomplete sections, irregular formatting, poor academic writing style, and issues with referencing. In other instances, examiners observed that proposals lacked some important elements like abstracts; hence, readers could not easily grasp the scope and contribution of a study. Other remarks highlighted issues such as inconsistent citation formats, irrelevant citations, and the use of non-academic sources instead of peer-reviewed literature. Moreover, various examiner reports highlighted concerns about the writing style, noting that some sections were too general and that the flow of arguments was not clearly outlined. Such structural gaps imply that the students might need more rigorous academic writing conventions and research proposal organisation instructions.

Summary of findings

Altogether, the results indicate that the weaknesses of the master research proposals are not accidental but systematic. The repetitive problems are on various levels of the research process, such as conceptual framing, theoretical justification, literature review, methodological choice, and the organisation of the academic writing. Collectively, these results indicate that to enhance the quality of research proposals, it is necessary to consider more profound pedagogical issues associated with research design awareness and academic writing abilities, not only with formatting or presentation (*Table 1*).

Table 1. Initial codes, categories, and themes from examiners' reports.

Sample recurring comments/issues	Initial codes	Category	Final theme
No abstract provided; abstract missing; abstract does not summarise the study well	Missing abstract; incomplete summary; structural omission	Proposal structure problems	Structural and academic writing deficiencies
The problem statement lacks a clear gap, is too policy-heavy, has insufficient empirical evidence, and has unclear urgency.	Unclear gap; weak justification; descriptive problem statement; lack of evidence	Weak problem formulation	Weak conceptual framing of research problems
Objectives overlap; RQ and RO are not aligned; one-to-one alignment is missing; and variables are not matched with objectives.	Misalignment; repetitive objectives; unclear focus; inconsistency	Poor internal coherence	Misalignment between research components
Literature lacks theoretical underpinning; the conceptual framework is weak; variables are not justified by theory.	Missing theory; weak conceptual basis; unsupported variables	Weak theoretical grounding	Lack of theoretical foundation
The literature review is narrative, lacks synthesis, has limited critical evaluation, uses outdated sources, and has irrelevant references.	Descriptive review; weak synthesis; outdated literature; poor source selection	Weak literature engagement	Weak literature review and critical analysis

Methodology too complex; estimator not justified; variables unclear; sample inappropriate; model mis-specified	Methodological confusion; weak justification; mismatch between data and method	Weak research design understanding	Methodological confusion and overcomplexity
AI-like writing; generic phrasing; inconsistency of flow; poor APA formatting; references unfocused	AI-like writing; poor academic style; referencing problems	Writing quality issues	Structural and academic writing deficiencies

The results of this paper show that weaknesses identified in master's research proposals are not drafting mistakes but show systematic deficiencies in the research knowledge of the students. In the examiner reports, several areas of weakness were identified across several sections of the proposal, particularly the problem statement, research objectives, literature review, and methodology. These issues are repeated among various students, which implies that the issue is organisational and pedagogical rather than personal. A significant problem is that students find it challenging to focus on a research problem as an academic one, as opposed to a general issue or policy concern. A significant number of examiner remarks mentioned that students reported intriguing topics without clearly indicating the research gap, empirical anomaly, or academic importance of the study. The problem statement was reported to be too broad, too descriptive or policy-orientated in a few instances. This implies that students can be familiar with the area of the topic but are not yet competent enough to frame that topic into a problem that is researchable and academically warranted. A second significant problem is related to the non-coherence of different proposal elements. Examiners consistently pointed out that research questions, objectives, variables, hypotheses, and methodology were more than once conflicting or redundant. This indicates that students may be approaching proposal writing as a series of separate segments rather than as a cohesive research design. They can, in effect, write the sections separately but are unable to ensure logical flow between the problem statement and the methodological plan.

The results also indicate a severe flaw in theoretical and literature-based arguments. Examiners in several reports have condemned the lack of theoretical underpinning, insufficient description of the relationship between variables, and writing of descriptive but not critical literature reviews. This reveals that students can be writing by summarising instead of critically analysing previous research. They do not seem to synthesise studies but rather seem to list studies to justify their constructs, establish the gap, and rationalise their methodological choices. The next key finding is that there is a high rate of methodological confusion, particularly in quantitative proposals. Examiners often expressed his apprehensions regarding inappropriate estimators, too complicated a methodology, poor reasons why a given technique was selected or the role of a variable was not clear, lack of clarity in his assumptions about sample size, and the lack of fit between data structure and statistical analysis. This implies that students may choose more sophisticated methods simply because they are perceived as such, rather than because the methods are appropriate for their needs. That is, technical ambition can surpass conceptual understanding. The reports also indicate that there are concerns about the quality of academic writing and the potential dependence on the AI-generated text. Remarks about generic wording, absence of flow, ineffective synthesis, and writing that seems AI-like indicate that some students will write work that appears academically refined on the surface but is otherwise shallow, disjointed, and disciplinarily unsophisticated. This plays a significant role in the teaching of postgraduates because it implies that support provision in proposal writing needs to be put in such a way that it is

primarily concerned with language accuracy, yet this should also be accompanied by argument development, critical thinking, and intellectual ownership of ideas. Combined, these results suggest that to improve the quality of proposals, it is not enough to ask students to write better. What is required is a more organised process of teaching and learning in which students are explicitly taught how to find research gaps, match components of a proposal, critically synthesise the literature, and select methods based on fit rather than complexity. The examiner reports evidence that students require a mentoring process in the rationale of a research design, rather than in the presentation of a proposal.

Practical implications for research methodology teaching

The results of this research have significant implications for research methodology teaching at postgraduate programmes. These weaknesses identified in examiner reports are recurrent and indicate that research methodology courses ought to emphasise research conceptualisation and design more than just proposal structure or formatting guidelines. Students require clear instructions on how to determine the gaps in research, the research questions, and the correspondence between research goals, theoretical concepts, and methodologies. Furthermore, the research methodology courses must be provided with systematic exercises facilitating the literature synthesis and critical analysis since these abilities are needed to formulate effective problem statements and research justifications. Research design workshops, guided literature mapping, and cycle-based proposal development exercises are various pedagogical strategies through which a student can gain a more accurate understanding of the relationship between various constituents of a research proposal and their connection to each other. Lastly, the article indicates that constant feedback provided by supervisors and examiners is also significant in enhancing research proposals. The introduction of iterative feedback to research methods courses can assist the student in improving their proposal and building stronger research design skills. Postgraduate programmes, by reinforcing these areas of research training, can enhance the ability of students to come up with coherent and academically sound research proposals.

Conclusion

The study is relevant to the literature on postgraduate research education because it uses empirical data of examiners as opposed to solely student perceptions or surveys. The study provides a diagnostic look at the actual weaknesses that are generally evident in master's research proposals by analysing examiner reports. The results indicate that enhancing the quality of research proposals cannot be achieved by merely providing writing instructions; rather, it entails a combination of organised pedagogical approaches, which empower the ability of students to conceptualise research, their research design, literature synthesis capabilities, and methodological reasoning. Therefore, research methodology courses should focus more on enhancing the research literacy and critical thinking of students to facilitate the process of writing proposals. To summarise, this paper demonstrates the need to enhance research literacy and proposal development among postgraduate students. The problems outlined in this work should be tackled to enhance the quality of research proposals and to help students acquire the skills necessary to complete postgraduate research successfully, such as critical thinking, effective communication, and understanding of research methodologies.

Acknowledgement

This research is self-funded.

Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

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