

Perception of the difficulties of international postgraduate students writing research proposal

Dorcas Oteng Acheampong

Nanjing Tech University, School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Nanjing, 211800, China
e-mail: nanaadebi32@gmail.com

Abstract

International postgraduate candidates of Universities in Nanjing come from diverse backgrounds and experiences. These students face several problems, especially in writing the research proposals. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of postgraduate students in writing the research proposal. The quantitative research design was used, which involved the use of online questionnaires. A sample of 320 international postgraduate students and 20 supervisors selected at random from Universities in Nanjing were used for the study. Study findings pinpoint towards the general problems to international postgraduate students' research proposal writing skills. Grounded on the results, the researcher concludes that identifying research gaps, reviewing and criticizing literature, and finding enough evidence to support the research proposal are significant problems for most postgraduate students in writing the research proposal. The study further concludes that these problems are due to lack of research materials, time constraints, low level of engagement with supervisors, and supervisors' hostile attitude. Understanding the language and concept of research is not a reason for postgraduate difficulties in a research proposal as identified by other literature. In this regard, the solutions to these problems for postgraduate students are effective supervision, students cultivating the habit of reading sufficient literature, supervisors giving equal attention to international postgraduate students, ample time for research, timely feedback, and supervisors' availability.

Keywords:

Research proposal; international postgraduate students; writing difficulties.

1 INTRODUCTION

Proposal writing is an important part of postgraduate studies, and before students proceed to collect data, they are required to have their research proposals approved. Krathwohl, (2005, p.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. Moreover, providing a rationale for the proposed research, a proposal describes a detailed methodology for conducting the research consistent with the professional or academic field's requirements and a statement on anticipated outcomes and/or benefits derived from the study.

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 a good impression to the makers. For this reason, Paul & Psych (2012) argued that a research proposal should convince others that your topic is worthy of researching and that you are a competent researcher. Regardless of students' research area and the methodology they choose, all research proposals must address the following questions: what students plan to accomplish, why they want to do it and how they are going to do it.

There are numerous challenges postgraduate students face in writing a proposal which includes, broad topics, inadequate literature, failure to provide proper context to frame research questions, inadequate assistance from supervisors, lacking organization and structure, limited time to complete the work, and many more (Paul & Psych 2012). Supervisors can perceive problems their students may not perceive because they are experts in their fields, research methods, and techniques. In some cases, both supervisors and postgraduate students may perceive similar problems but may perceive sources of the problems differently (Bitchner & Basturkmen, 2006).

The study aims to examine the problems in international postgraduate students' research proposals, explore possible reasons for the problems, and put forward suggestions for improvement. Therefore, to achieve the objective of the research, the researcher formulated the interview question as follows:

- What are the problems in the research proposals of international postgraduate students?
- What are the possible reasons for the problems in the research proposals of international students?
- What are the suggestions for the solutions to the problems?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Concept of Research Proposal

Research proposal is an action plan and a technique to be followed according to the study's specific objectives. It sets out the key concerns or problems that a researcher wants to investigate. It describes the overall research area from which a study falls, relating to current knowledge and recent discussions on the subject. That alone also reveals the originality of a proposed study (University of Birmingham, 2020). As part of the original thesis, research paper, or dissertation criteria, academic research proposals are usually written. They are generally in the same format as a research paper, with an introduction, a literature review, an overview of research methods and the research objectives, and a conclusion. This basic structure may vary between projects and fields of research, each with its requirements (Qureshi, 2012; Royce, 2009; Wong, n.d.).

It is necessary to prepare research proposals because it promotes the smooth flow of different research activities, thereby making research as productive as possible and providing adequate information with minimal effort, time, and resources. The research proposal is the context within which the research is conducted; it is the blueprint for the compilation, calculation, and data analysis. Therefore, the proposal includes a description of what the investigator can do from the writing of the hypothesis and its organizational consequences to the final review of the findings (Kabir, 2018).

All the key elements involved in the design of a completed research project should be included in the proposal, with sufficient detail to enable readers to assess the validity and reliability of the proposed research. The only items that are missing from the research proposal are the outcomes of the analysis and the explanation of these findings. Finally, a successful proposal tests the writing quality, and the proposal must be concise, transparent, and compelling (Labaree, 2020).

In most cases, students want to submit a research proposal by themselves. This is very common in writing undergraduate theses at the lower levels of academia. However, in more serious research and writing forms, such as writing a postgraduate research paper, students will be directed by a supervisory committee. This is recommended because academic research implies that a student contributes something more scholastic and valuable to academia as a whole at this stage. The committee will ensure that a student's proposal's purpose and direction are unique (International Hospitality Research Centre, 2016).

A proposal is for an academic supervisor to determine whether a student has thought adequately about the topic and planned enough for the study. It also gives a supervisor an impression that a student can simply and objectively compose his or her ideas. A proposal forms the groundwork for a kind of contract with a supervisor – it simply tells what the student intends to research and how. This gives both the student and supervisor an action plan to follow to finalize the thesis (Bak, 2015).

2.2 Research Self-Efficacy Theory

The degree of confidence in the conduct of various research tasks can be described as self-efficacy of research (Bieschke, 2006; Forester et al., 2004). Research self-efficacy, such as cultivating a research attitude, is expected to have an impact on student choice of behavior, engagement, and eventually good performance (Onwuegbuzie & Teddie, 2003). Forester et al. (2004) argue that research self-efficacy will foster student research engagement and productivity. Statistically meaningful correlations were identified between research self-efficacy and research productivity (Schunk & Pajares, 2002).

Onwuegbuzie et al. (2000) also found that the expectations of students of their overall achievement in a research methodology course were the best predictor of their overall course achievement, along with statistical anxiety, explaining 12.2 percent of the variance. Steur, Jansen, and Hofman (2012) propose that RSE can also be used as a scholarship predictor, after which scholarship will be about basic research abilities and a worldwide scholarly attitude. It has been demonstrated that a research methodology module can influence the self-efficacy of students. Holden et al (1999) found that students' research self-efficacy in social work increased in a one-semester course of study. In their pre-test results, these students scored the lowest for their confidence in designing and implementing the best feasible data analysis strategy. No other South African studies were exploring the growth of student research's self-efficacy, except for a conceptual study of how mentoring can influence research self-efficacy (Schulze, 2010).

2.3 Functions of Research Proposal

The main reason for the proposal is that the reader is convinced of the value of a project and the researchers' competence. The researcher will have to show he/she has a strategy for his / her work and the project is going to be successful (Milgram, 2019). A postgraduate will be given guidance on how to write a research paper, as writing at this stage means bringing something valuable to academia. Qureshi (2012) implies that a research proposal meets some criteria: (1) provide guidelines to the researcher for adopting the systematic approach towards the solution of the problems; (2) provides a basis for the evaluation of the proposal by researcher's; makes researcher aware of the problems and difficulties he/she will have face in his/her study; (3) restores confidence in researcher about the feasibility and worth of his investigations; (4) stimulates the researcher and moves him to the goal of completing his project; (5) enables the adviser to assess the progress of work of his advisee at regular intervals.

Krathwohl (2005) also argues that the purpose of a research proposal is twofold: to identify and explain the need to study a research problem and identify realistic ways of performing the proposed analysis. According to Krathwohl (2005), the design elements and methods of conducting research are governed by standards of the predominant discipline in which the problem lies; hence, the research proposals are more specific and detailed, and less formal than a general project proposal. Zouaoui (2007) is of a similar view to Milgram (2019), who asserts the purpose of the research proposal is to convince others that the student has a valuable research project and that he/she has the skills and work plan to complete it.

2.4 Empirical Review

2.4.1 Perceptions of students on the difficulties of postgraduate students in research proposal writing

A large number of existing studies in the broader literature have examined students' perception of the difficulty in research proposal writing. One such study was conducted by Keyvandarian and Afzali (2019), whose study aimed to identify the type of problems that postgraduate EFL learners encounter in writing their thesis proposals. The results showed that among the highest recurrent problems were discourse and linguistic issues. The questionnaire review also

suggested that EFL postgraduate learners had a negative attitude towards writing proposals and found discourse problems in writing as their key challenge.

A study by Manchishi et al. (2015) whose aim was to establish the common mistakes committed and challenges faced by postgraduate students in the school of education at the University of Zambia revealed the following students' difficulties in writing the proposal: unavailability of lecturers for consultations, negative comments from supervisors, lack of materials, limited time in writing the proposal, and lack of coordination between Directorate of Research and Graduate Studies, School of Education and the Lecturers/supervisors.

Perceptions of supervisors on the difficulties of postgraduate students in research proposal writing

The obstacle faced by postgraduate students in research proposals is a global trend in prominent and less prominent universities. A study performed in Sweden discovered that students faced challenges in accessing information related to their research and cultural shock (Ezebilo, 2012). The study cited a lack of preparation for postgraduate and poor mentoring studies. Several students lacked confidence in presenting their work because of a lack of guidance and language issues.

Students find thesis writing as the most challenging part of postgraduate studies. In line with Pearson's (2005) study, it has been noted that Postgraduate distance students who are pursuing their studies have had many challenges with the writing of their thesis, particularly in the research proposal stage. This is supported by Olaitan et al. (2009), who stated that the challenges faced by students in research proposal range from inability to select a researchable topic, hostile attitude of supervisors, the lack of resource materials, the lack of finance, the lack of will power on the side of the students and ill health among others.

In terms of academic writing difficulties, Evans and Green (2007) indicated that earlier studies established that L2 students perceived academic writing as a daunting task; however, this study dealt with the macro-level of academic writing skills rather than the micro-level. The study's findings by Evans and Green (2007) revealed that the students' language-related skills were more challenging than problems related to content. Language-related issues deal with difficulties in efficiently and adequately capturing and conveying ideas, while content-related issues include writing, introduction, references, and conclusion. Their study results have supported other studies such as Bitchener & Basturkmen (2006) and Ankawi (2015), in which learners encounter difficulties in expressing thought smoothly with appropriate academic writing styles and organizing ideas and arguments. Researchers found that a paper's structure and content could be more difficult for students to organize than language-related issues.

A study by Lumadi (2008) also revealed that some students have complained of not contacting supervisors and waiting long periods to get feedback. Lumadi (2008) recommended students should be allowed to share both problems and solutions, which will help build their confidence. Concerning the context of the present study, Pramela, Khazriyati and Norizan (2014) stated that for the following reasons, namely an overwhelming source of literature and a growing reach of literature today, ELS postgraduate students consider it a challenge to arrive at a suitable topic for research. When assessing the significance of these reading materials to their work, they face the challenge too. Students cannot classify reading materials that would guide them through the study phase that makes sourcing them a challenge for the relevant literature. They also lack the skills required to write reasonable research objectives and questions. This problem stems from their inability to make a good statement on the problem, notably because they do not read enough before writing their research proposals.

In their study, Manchishi et al. (2018) assessed the challenges faced by postgraduate distance students in research proposal writing at the University of Zambia. In this study, a descriptive case study and the Tinto (1975) model have been adapted to incorporate demographic, individual characteristics preventing postgraduate distance students from writing quality research proposal papers. The significant barriers found for the qualitative research proposal writing skills of postgraduate distance students were insufficient time as research proposal writing is combined with other modules, lack of research proposal writing skills on the part of postgraduate distance students, poor attitude of students towards research proposal writing, and low-frequency level of engagement with supervisors.

Another study on the analysis of research proposals and challenges faced by postgraduate trainees in internal medicine and allied disciplines during the fellowship training program was conducted by Ahmed & Mahboob (2016). They used a qualitative, grounded theory approach and analyzed research proposals for the dissertation in internal medicine and allied disciplines of 32 postgraduate fellowship trainees from the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Pakistan (CPSP). The findings revealed most postgraduate fellowship students, had problems in preparing research proposals for dissertations, mainly due to a lack of supervisor and CPSP support.

A study seeking to examine the supervisors' perspectives in supervising postgraduate students' work was conducted by Mapolisa and Mafa (2011). Among the study's main findings, most supervisors agreed that most students had limitations in developing proposal, ranging from not knowing what to include in the background to study and ethical considerations, although with varying degrees. Most students failed to establish the gaps in the literature that should be addressed in their proposed studies. This generally led to incorrectly constructed problem statements. There has also doubted about the students' ability to formulate research questions/sub-problems.

From the reviewed literature, it is clear that there are different types of mistakes committed and challenges faced by students which include, broad topics, inadequate literature, failure to provide proper context to frame research questions, inadequate assistance from supervisors, lacking organization and structure, limited time to complete the work and many more. The literature has reported on difficulties perceived by supervisors and students as separate groups, but it has not considered the extent to which there is a shared understanding of the difficulties in supervisor-student pairs. Also, the literature reported the difficulties perceived by supervisors and L2 postgraduate students but has not considered English as foreign language postgraduate students. Most of the studies have focused on postgraduate

students within their local settings. Almost a handful of studies have attempted to address International Postgraduate Students' problems, especially students studying in China.

2.4.2 Perceptions of supervisors on the difficulties of postgraduate students in research proposal writing

A study seeking to examine the supervisors' perspectives in supervising postgraduate students' work was conducted by Mapolisa and Mafa (2011). Among the study's main findings, most supervisors agreed that most students had limitations in the development of proposals, ranging from not knowing what to include in the background to study and ethical considerations, although with varying degrees. Most students failed to establish the gaps in the literature that should be addressed in their proposed studies. This generally led to incorrectly constructed problem statements. There has also doubted about the students' ability to formulate research questions/sub-problems. Research objectives, in most cases, were not SMART. The supervisors' experiences showed that while Limitations and Delimitations were normally included in proposals, their weight fell significantly short of postgraduate standards.

A study was conducted by Manchishi et al. (2015) in Zambia that involved postgraduate students and their lecturers on postgraduate research supervisory problems. They found a variety of difficulties facing students, including but not limited to understanding the content of a research proposal; understanding the language and concepts of research; critical analysis and synthesis of literature reviewed; poor styles of referencing and plagiarism; insufficient time for writing proposals and lack of research materials.

In 2018, another study was conducted in Nigeria, taking the discussion closer to Africa, focusing on obstacles to postgraduate research and training at the University of Ibadan (Desmennu & Owoaje, 2018). Of the total 137 population sampled (67 percent were full doctoral students), 91 percent of respondents indicated a need for training on the development of proposals, while 56 percent indicated a lack of access to research materials.

The problems arising from the lack of a formalized research writing structure were explored in another study conducted in Malaysia; students were found to be burdened with academic language and concepts (Jeyaraj, 2018). The researcher argued that the findings indicated significant student needs and suggested that timely completion rates could be improved, and student learning experience enhanced by addressing these issues.

Peng (2018) recommends that learners changing needs be recognized for their overall academic writing competence, reviewing literature and conceptualizing framework in particular, so that tailor-made learning objectives can be established accordingly in curriculum design, textbook selection, and teaching materials. He also suggested that supervisors should offer more academic writing opportunities to advanced learners so that there is ample practice available for them to improve their writing competence.

3 METHOD

In this study, the descriptive survey design to investigate International Postgraduate Students' perceptions of the Research Proposal's difficulties was used. The quantitative research design was also chosen because it enables the researcher to assess attitudes and opinions about events, individuals, or procedures (Gay, 1995). In this regard, it enabled the researcher to obtain opinions about perceptions of the difficulties of International Postgraduate Students Writing the Research Proposal. The targeted sample included 320 international postgraduate students and 20 supervisors selected at random from Nanjing's various universities. To carry out the study, the researcher developed an online questionnaire used in the compilation of information. The questionnaire tool was in the form of both open-ended and closed-ended in nature. The data gathered from questionnaires were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22. The researcher used descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) to describe the responses of the items on the questionnaire as indicated by the respondents.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Problem's students encounter in writing the research proposal

4.1.1 Postgraduate students' response

Postgraduate students were asked to indicate their level of agreement to their problems in writing the research proposal on 1-5 Likert scale items. The results of the findings are presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Postgraduate students' perception of the problem's students encounters in writing the research proposal

Problem's students meet in writing the research proposal	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Rank
Deciding the research topic	1.00	5.00	3.74	5 th
Organizing Ideas and Arguments	1.00	5.00	3.58	6 th
Summarizing and Paraphrasing	1.00	5.00	3.89	4 th
Reviewing and criticizing Literature	1.00	5.00	4.54	2 nd
Identifying research gaps	1.00	5.00	4.96	1 st
Finding enough evidence to support research paper	1.00	5.00	3.97	3 rd

With regards to the problems, students encounter in writing the research proposal, identifying research gaps ($M = 4.96$), reviewing and criticizing literature ($M = 4.54$) were identified as the major problems postgraduate students encounter while finding enough evidence to support research paper was identified as the third major problem students encounter ($M = 3.97$). The postgraduate students also agreed with deciding the research topic ($M = 3.74$), organizing ideas and arguments ($M = 3.58$), summarizing, and paraphrasing ($M = 3.89$) as major problems in writing the research proposal.

4.1.2 Academic Supervisors response

Academic supervisors were asked to indicate their agreement level to students' problems in writing the research proposal on a 1-5 Likert scale items. The results of the findings are presented in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Academic supervisors' perception of the problem's students encounter in writing the research proposal

Problem's students encounter in writing the research proposal	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Rank
Deciding the research topic	1.00	5.00	3.51	8 th
Organizing Ideas and Arguments	1.00	5.00	3.56	7 th
Summarizing and Paraphrasing	1.00	5.00	3.84	6 th
Reviewing and criticizing Literature	1.00	5.00	4.56	2 nd
Identifying research gaps	1.00	5.00	4.67	1 st
Finding enough evidence to support research paper	1.00	5.00	3.97	5 th
Utilizing proper academic language and vocabulary	1.00	5.00	4.12	3 rd
Poor style of referencing and plagiarism	1.00	5.00	4.02	4 th

From Table 2, supervisors agree that identifying research gaps (M=4.67) is the problem students face most in research proposal writing. This was followed by reviewing and criticizing literature (M= 4.56), while utilizing proper academic language and vocabulary was identified as the third problem in research proposal writing. The supervisors also agree to the poor referencing and plagiarism style (M=4.02) as a problem student encounter, ranking fourth. Finding enough evidence to support the research paper (M=3.97) ranked fifth as the problem postgraduate students encounter in research proposal writing. The academic supervisors agreed with summarizing and paraphrasing (M= 3.84), organizing ideas and arguments (M= 3.56), deciding the research topic (M= 3.51), as the respective sixth, seventh and eighth problems postgraduate students face in writing the research proposal.

4.2 Possible reasons for the problems postgraduate students encounter in writing the research proposal

4.2.1 Postgraduate students' response

Postgraduate students were asked to indicate their level of agreement to the possible reasons for their problems in writing the research proposal on 1-5 Likert scale item. The results of the findings are presented in Table 3 below:

Table 3. Postgraduate students' response to possible reasons for postgraduate students' problems in research proposal

Possible reasons for postgraduate students' problems in research proposal	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Rank
Unavailability of supervisors for consultation	1.00	5.00	3.74	3 rd
Lack of research materials	1.00	5.00	4.58	1 st
Limited time to write the proposal	1.00	5.00	3.89	2 nd
Hostile attitude of supervisors	1.00	5.00	3.54	4 th
Lack of understanding of the language and concept of research	1.00	5.00	2.46	low

From Table 3, the students agreed to lack research materials (M= 4.58) as the first possible reason for the problems postgraduate students encounter in the research proposal. Limited time to write the proposal (M= 3.89) is the second possible reason agreed by the respondents while the unavailability of supervisors for consultation (M= 3.74) was revealed as the third possible reason. Hostile supervisors (M= 3.54) are the fourth possible reason respondents are revealed as the possible reason for students' problems in the research proposal. However, lack of understanding of the language and concept of research (M= 2.46) was disagreed by the respondents to be a possible reason for the problems in research proposal writing.

In agreement with the literature, lack of research materials (Ali, Qasem, & Zayid, 2019), limited time to write the proposal (Manchishi, Ndlovu and Mwanza, 2015), unavailability of supervisors for consultation (Manchishi, Ndlovu and Mwanza, 2015) and hostile attitude of supervisors (Olaitan et al., 2009) were discovered as reasons for postgraduate students' problems in writing the research proposal. Lack of understanding of the language and concept of research was not in congruence with literature because, in literature, it was identified as one of the possible reasons in Manchishi et al. (2015) study.

4.2.2 Academic Supervisors response

Academic supervisors were also asked to indicate their level of agreement to the possible reasons for the problems postgraduate students encounter in writing the research proposal on 1-5 Likert scale. The results of the findings are presented in Table 4 below:

Table 4. Academic supervisors' response to the reasons for postgraduate students' problems in research proposal

Possible reasons for postgraduate students' problems in research proposal	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Rank
Lack of interest in research	1.00	5.00	3.64	3 rd
Poor attitude towards a research proposal	1.00	5.00	4.28	2 nd
Low-frequency level of engagement with supervisors	1.00	5.00	4.79	1 st
Selecting a research topic with inadequate research materials	1.00	5.00	2.44	low
Lack of understanding of the language and concept of research	1.00	5.00	2.34	low

Regarding the possible reasons for students' problems in research proposal by supervisors the following were discovered; Low-frequency level of engagement with supervisors was agreed strongly by respondents while poor attitude towards research proposal was identified as the second possible reason. Lack of research interest was identified as the third possible reason. Selecting a research topic with inadequate research materials and lack of understanding of the language and concept of research was disagreed by respondents as possible reasons for postgraduate students' problems in research proposal.

The findings agree with literature in that low-frequency level of engagement with supervisors, poor attitude towards research proposal and lack of research interest were discovered to be reasons for students' problems in research proposals (Manchishi, Ndlovu & Mwanza 2015; Ahmed & Mahboob 2016; Manchishi et al. 2018; Lumadi 2008; Ali, Qasem, & Zayid, 2019). Contrarily, selecting a research topic with inadequate research materials and lack of understanding of the language and concept of research disagree with literature (Manchishi, Ndlovu & Mwanza 2015; Olaitan et al. 2009; Desmennu & Owoaje, 2018; Manchishi et al., 2015).

4.3 Solutions to the problems encountered by International postgraduate students in research proposal

4.3.1 Postgraduate students' response

Postgraduate students were asked to give solutions to the problems they encounter in writing a research proposal. The responses were represented with a code (a simple phrase that summarizes the idea). Once they were coded, the researcher was able to analyze the responses presented in Table 5 below:

Table 5. Students' response to solutions to the problems encountered by International postgraduate students in research proposal

Code	Total respondents who answered	% of respondents who answered
Read more literature	98	32
Effective supervision	101	33
Ample Time for research	28	9
Attention to Postgraduate students	45	14
Supervisor's availability	15	5
Timely feedback	23	7

Most of the respondents believed that academic supervisors' effective supervision would help students in research proposal writing, represented by 33% of the respondents suggesting similar solutions. 32% of the respondents also suggested that students should cultivate the habit of reading sufficient literatures to understand research proposals while 14% of the respondents similarly suggested supervisors should give equal attention to international postgraduate students. Ample time for research, timely feedback, and supervisors' availability were also suggested as a solution to curb the problems by 9%, 7%, and 5% of the respondents respectively.

4.3.2 Academic Supervisors' response

Academic supervisors were asked to give solutions to international postgraduate students' problems in writing a research proposal. The responses were represented with a code (simple phrase that summarizes the idea). Once they were coded, the researcher was able to analyze the responses presented in Table 6 below:

Table 6. Supervisors' response to solutions to the problems encountered by International postgraduate students in research proposal

Code	Total respondents who answered	% of respondents who answered
Engage supervisors	7	39
Read adequate literatures	8	44
No suggestion	3	17

From the table, most of the supervisors suggested that international postgraduate students should read adequate research literature to understand the research proposal to curb their problems, represented by 44% of the respondents' while 39% suggested students should engage them more in the research proposal. However, 17% of the respondents without suggestion.

5 DISCUSSION

In agreement with the literature per postgraduate students' response reviewing and criticizing literature and identifying research gaps were identified by Kotamjani, Samad & Fahimirad (2018); Mapolisa and Mafa (2011); Manchishi et al., (2015) as major problems students face in writing the research proposal. Also, deciding the research topic, organizing ideas and arguments, summarising and paraphrasing were significant problems that were in congruence with literature because, in literature, these were major problems identified by other researchers (Ali, Qasem, & Zayid 2019; Olaitan et al., 2009; Pramela, Khazriyati & Norizan 2014; Evans & Green, 2007; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Ankawi, 2015).

The findings of the study per supervisors response agree with that of literature to a greater extent because identifying research gaps, reviewing and criticizing literature, utilizing proper academic language and vocabulary, poor style of referencing and plagiarism, and finding enough evidence to support the research paper are all problems students face in writing a research proposal (Ali, Qasem, & Zayid, 2019; Olaitan et al. 2009; Pramela, Khazriyati, & Norizan, 2014; Evans & Green, 2007; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Ankawi, 2015; Manchishi et al., 2015; Kotamjani, Samad & Fahimirad, 2018). Literature also mentions that summarising and paraphrasing, organizing ideas and arguments, deciding the research topic are all problems students face in writing the research proposal (Ali, Qasem, & Zayid, 2019; Olaitan et al. 2009; Pramela, Khazriyati & Norizan 2014; Evans & Green, 2007; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Ankawi, 2015).

Lack of research materials (Ali, Qasem, & Zayid, 2019), limited time to write the proposal (Manchishi, Ndlovu and Mwanza, 2015), unavailability of supervisors for consultation (Manchishi, Ndlovu & Mwanza, 2015), and hostile attitude of supervisors (Olaitan et al., 2009) were discovered as reasons for postgraduate students' problems in writing the research proposal. Lack of understanding of the language and concept of research was not in congruence with literature because, in literature, it was identified as one of the possible reasons in Manchishi et al. (2015) study. The findings agree with the literature in that low-frequency level of engagement with supervisors, poor attitude towards research proposal and lack of interest in research were discovered to be reasons for students' problems in research proposals (Manchishi, Ndlovu & Mwanza 2015; Mahboob & Ahmed 2016; Manchishi et al. 2018; Lumadi, 2008; Ali, Qasem, & Zayid, 2019). Contrarily, selecting a research topic with inadequate research materials and lack of understanding of the language and concept of research disagree with literature (Manchishi, Ndlovu & Mwanza 2015; Olaitan et al. 2009; Desmennu & Owoaje, 2018; Manchishi et al., 2015).

6 CONCLUSION

This study examined perceptions on the difficulties of international postgraduate students writing the research proposal. Grounded on the results, the researcher concludes that identifying research gaps, reviewing and criticizing literature, and finding enough evidence to support the research paper are major problems for most postgraduate students in writing the research proposal. The study further concludes that these problems are due to lack of research materials, time constraints, low level of engagement with supervisors, and supervisors' hostile attitude. Understanding the language and concept of research is not a reason for postgraduate difficulties in a research proposal as identified by other literatures. In this regard, the solutions to these problems for postgraduate students are effective supervision, students cultivating the habit of reading sufficient literature, supervisors giving equal attention to international postgraduate students, ample time for research, timely feedback, and supervisors' availability.

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