



Effective Strategies in Writing a Dissertation Proposal

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ABSTRACT

Writing a dissertation proposal is a crucial stage that determines the success of doctoral research. However, various studies indicate that many PhD students struggle to identify research gaps, formulate theoretical frameworks, and select appropriate methodologies. This study aims to identify effective strategies for developing dissertation proposals through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of articles published between 2020 and 2024. The SLR process includes identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion using databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, and Semantic Scholar, resulting in 27 articles that met the criteria. The analysis reveals four key strategies: (1) research gap analysis through mapping trends, identifying contradictory findings, and exploring unanswered research areas; (2) strengthening theoretical reviews using literature-mapping techniques and developing analytical theoretical frameworks; (3) designing research methodologies that align with research problems and objectives; and (4) academic supervision and engagement in research communities to enhance the quality of scientific argumentation. This study affirms that developing a dissertation proposal requires a systematic, evidence-based approach supported by adequate academic guidance. The findings provide conceptual contributions for doctoral students and higher education institutions in improving the quality of dissertation proposals

INTRODUCTION

The preparation of a dissertation proposal is one of the most fundamental stages in doctoral education, as it serves as the primary foundation that determines the direction, quality, and scholarly contribution of the research to be conducted. At this stage, doctoral students are required to demonstrate critical, analytical, and logical thinking skills in formulating research problems and justifying the significance of their study. A well-developed proposal not only presents a research plan but also reflects a deep understanding of relevant theories and the ability to position the study within the broader landscape of scientific scholarship.

In practice, however, many doctoral students struggle to develop their proposals systematically and academically. According to Nguyen (2021), one of the major challenges lies in determining an appropriate research focus and constructing a strong theoretical argument to justify the urgency of the study. Such weaknesses often result in proposals that are unfocused, overly broad, or lacking clear relevance to theoretical and practical developments within their respective fields.

In addition, limited understanding of fundamental research concepts presents another challenge. Kumar (2020) notes that many dissertation proposals fail at early stages due to students' insufficient ability to identify research gaps, clearly formulate variables, and determine methodological approaches aligned with their research objectives. Misalignment among proposal components frequently leads to rejection or extensive revisions.

Identifying a research gap is a particularly crucial aspect of proposal development, as it determines the novelty and scholarly contribution of the study. Many doctoral students are not yet accustomed to conducting in-depth, structured literature mapping, making it difficult to identify research gaps that are truly relevant and significant. This situation reinforces the importance of developing literature review skills that go beyond description, encompassing analytical and critical engagement with existing studies.

On the other hand, constructing a comprehensive theoretical framework also presents a significant challenge. A theoretical framework functions to connect key concepts with the research focus, requiring the ability to select relevant theories, integrate scientific perspectives, and logically map relationships among variables. Without a solid theoretical foundation, a dissertation proposal lacks direction and fails to provide a strong scholarly justification for the chosen methodological approach.

Methodological competence is equally vital for doctoral students. The methodology section of a dissertation proposal must not be crafted arbitrarily; rather, it should be aligned with the research objectives, the chosen design, data collection techniques, and data analysis strategies that ensure the validity and reliability of findings. This demands a strong understanding of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches so that the research design can produce credible and accountable results.

Given these complexities and challenges, a systematic strategy is needed to assist doctoral students in producing academically sound and feasible dissertation proposals. This study aims to identify effective strategies for dissertation proposal development using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. This method is selected because it enables researchers to comprehensively examine recent findings, thereby formulating relevant academic guidelines for doctoral students in developing their dissertation proposals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dissertation Proposal

A dissertation proposal is an academic document that outlines the research plan for doctoral-level study in a systematic manner, beginning with the background, problem formulation, research objectives, literature review, and research methodology. This document is not merely an administrative requirement but reflects the student's academic capability to construct a coherent scholarly argument. According to Ali & Hassan (2022), the quality of a dissertation proposal indicates the researcher's readiness to enter the core research phase; therefore, conceptual weaknesses at this stage may directly affect the overall quality of the dissertation.

Ali & Hassan (2022) emphasize that a dissertation proposal must fulfill three fundamental components: theoretical relevance, scholarly contribution, and methodological alignment. Theoretical relevance means that the proposal must be grounded in a theoretical framework that is truly connected to the phenomenon under investigation. Scholarly contribution refers to the novelty or expected findings of the study, while methodological alignment stresses the consistency between the research questions, approach, and data analysis techniques. These three aspects serve as the minimum standards of a research proposal at the doctoral level.

Ultimately, writing a dissertation proposal requires integrative skills in synthesizing theory, research context, and methodological design. Doctoral students must engage deeply with the literature to construct strong scientific arguments. Without a solid theoretical foundation and an appropriate methodology, the proposal may lack coherence and scientific accountability. Therefore, understanding the key components of a proposal is a crucial first step in producing credible and high-quality doctoral research.

Research Gap

A research gap is a crucial element in a dissertation proposal because it forms the basis for arguing why a study needs to be conducted. Thomas (2021) explains that a research gap emerges when there is a phenomenon or issue insufficiently addressed by previous studies, either in terms of theory, method, or research context. Identifying such gaps indicates the researcher's understanding of the evolving body of knowledge within the field. According to Thomas (2021), strategies for identifying research gaps include analyzing research trends, tracing contradictions among findings, and evaluating methodological limitations in prior studies. This process requires critical reading

and the ability to group findings based on specific themes or conceptual frameworks. Through such analysis, researchers can determine unexplored areas that may serve as the dissertation's scholarly contribution.

The ability to identify a research gap distinguishes doctoral-level research from studies conducted at earlier academic stages. Without a clear gap, the research lacks novelty and its scholarly contribution becomes weak. Thus, determining a research gap is not a mere formality but a scientific process that positions the research within the existing body of knowledge. A well-defined gap guides the researcher in formulating research questions and selecting an appropriate methodology.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is the conceptual foundation used by the researcher to understand, explain, and analyze the research phenomenon. Rahman (2023) states that a theoretical framework functions as a conceptual map that connects the research variables with the underlying theories. At the doctoral level, researchers are expected not only to cite theories but also to synthesize them to demonstrate the scholarly positioning of their research.

Rahman (2023) further explains that a doctoral researcher must be able to identify the main theories that form the foundation of the research, relevant supporting theories, and the strengths and weaknesses of each. Constructing a theoretical framework is not simply presenting a summary of theories, but rather demonstrating critical understanding of how those theories are related, contradictory, or complementary. Thus, the theoretical framework becomes an analytical tool that guides the researcher in viewing the phenomenon through a structured scientific lens.

The theoretical framework also influences how researchers design instruments, select methods, and interpret data. Without a strong theoretical foundation, research lacks analytical direction and tends to become merely descriptive. Therefore, constructing a comprehensive theoretical framework is an essential element of a dissertation proposal, as it strengthens scientific argumentation, clarifies the research approach, and supports the validity of the findings.

Dissertation Methodology

The dissertation methodology explains the scientific approach used by the researcher to answer the research questions. The choice of method must be based on alignment between the research objectives, the type of data required, and the nature of the phenomenon under study. Arikunto (2022) highlights that an appropriate methodology determines the validity and credibility of the research findings, making a deep understanding of research philosophy important for doctoral students.

Arikunto (2022) also notes that research methodology includes quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method approaches, each with its own strengths and limitations. Researchers must be able to select the method that best aligns with the research focus and ensure that data collection and analysis techniques are conducted systematically and reproducibly. At the doctoral level, methodological selection must be grounded in rigorous theoretical and empirical considerations, not personal preference.

In the context of preparing a dissertation proposal, methodology serves as the operational framework for conducting the research. Therefore, it must clearly explain the research design, data sources, sampling techniques, data collection instruments, and analysis procedures. Methodological precision is one of the key indicators of proposal quality, as research cannot be scientifically justified without a clear and logical methodological foundation.

Previous Studies

A number of studies have examined the challenges and strategies involved in writing dissertation proposals. Smith and Lee (2020) conducted a qualitative study to explore the difficulties experienced by doctoral students during the process of writing research proposals. Their findings indicate that the greatest challenges students encounter involve the ability to formulate a clear research gap, construct a systematic literature review, and align the problem formulation with the appropriate methodological approach. They emphasize the need for structured academic supervision to help students develop proposals that are theoretically and methodologically sound.

Another study by Martinez (2021) specifically analyzed strategies for identifying research gaps in doctoral research. Through an in-depth conceptual investigation, Martinez found that many students struggle to comprehend scholarly trends and to distinguish genuinely novel research from studies that merely replicate prior work. He asserts that the ability to identify research gaps is central to establishing the novelty of a dissertation. Therefore, systematic approaches such as trend analysis, bibliometric mapping, and critical examination of inconsistencies in previous studies are essential.

Furthermore, Rahman and Yusuf (2023) reviewed dissertation proposal writing approaches across various graduate programs. Their findings show that proposal quality is strongly influenced by the instructional structure provided within doctoral programs. Programs that offer targeted training, methodological workshops, and intensive supervision demonstrate a significant improvement in students' proposal quality. Their study highlights the importance of a comprehensive strategy in proposal development, particularly in the areas of theoretical framework construction and methodological alignment.

In comparison with these prior studies, the present research shares several fundamental similarities. Like earlier works, this research focuses on the challenges and strategies encountered in composing dissertation proposals, particularly in relation to identifying research gaps, developing theoretical frameworks, and determining appropriate research methodologies. Another similarity lies in the shared objective of strengthening doctoral students' academic capacity, enabling them to produce scientifically mature proposals.

However, this study also demonstrates several important differences. Smith and Lee (2020) employed a qualitative, interview-based approach, while Martinez (2021) and Rahman and Yusuf (2023) used conceptual analyses or thematic reviews. In contrast to these three studies, the present study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, which is more structured and comprehensive in the process of collecting, screening, and analyzing literature. Moreover, this study does not focus solely on one particular aspect—such as

identifying research gaps or proposal-writing challenges – but instead provides a holistic synthesis of effective strategies for developing dissertation proposals, covering theoretical, methodological, and technical dimensions.

The primary strength of this study lies in its methodological approach using SLR. This method provides a stronger foundation as the processes of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion are conducted transparently and based on evidence. In addition, the scope of this study is broader because it analyzes 27 selected articles from the period 2020–2024, ensuring that the synthesis reflects the most recent developments in doctoral education. This research is also more holistic than previous studies, as it not only highlights a single challenge but presents a comprehensive set of strategies ranging from problem formulation to methodological design. Therefore, this study offers both practical and theoretical contributions, serving as a valuable reference for doctoral students and as a resource for curriculum development in proposal-writing training within graduate programs.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to identify and synthesize effective strategies for developing dissertation proposals among doctoral students. The SLR method was selected because it provides a comprehensive overview through a systematic examination of previous studies, ensuring that the conclusions drawn are grounded in strong scientific evidence and are academically accountable. The SLR procedure in this research follows the stages recommended by Kitchenham (2004), namely identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

Identification

The identification stage was conducted by searching for articles across three major scientific databases: Google Scholar, Scopus, and Semantic Scholar. These databases were chosen due to their broad and credible coverage of literature related to higher education and research methodology. The search process utilized several predetermined keywords, including: “dissertation proposal development,” “doctoral research strategies,” “proposal writing challenges,” and “research gap identification.” Various combinations of these keywords were used to broaden the search scope and ensure that relevant articles were captured. The search was limited to articles published between 2020–2024 to ensure that the data used reflects the most recent developments in dissertation proposal preparation.

Screening

The screening stage involved filtering the articles identified in the previous step. From a total of 73 articles, an initial selection was conducted based on three criteria: (1) relevance of the topic to the research focus, (2) publication in peer-reviewed scientific journals, and (3) written in English or Indonesian. This selection process ensured that the literature included met acceptable academic quality standards. After screening, 34 articles met the initial criteria.

Eligibility

The eligibility stage consisted of an in-depth review of the abstracts and core content of each article. The purpose was to ensure that each article addresses strategic aspects related to dissertation proposal development, such as research gap identification, theoretical framework construction, proposal-writing challenges, and strategies for proposal enhancement. Articles that did not directly address dissertation proposal strategies or only partially touched on the topic were excluded. After this stage, 27 articles were deemed substantively relevant.

Inclusion

At the inclusion stage, the 27 selected articles were analyzed more deeply and coded according to emerging thematic categories. The coding process was conducted manually, taking into account thematic structures such as: strategies for identifying research gaps, conceptual approaches for developing theoretical frameworks, effective proposal-writing techniques, common challenges faced by doctoral students, and recommendations for strengthening academic capacity. The results of this analysis served as the basis for formulating the findings and discussion of this study. The inclusion stage ensures that the final synthesis accurately represents the empirical and conceptual contributions of prior research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) indicate that the dissertation proposal development process involves several key strategies consistently recommended by researchers between 2020 and 2024. Four main strategies were identified: research gap analysis, strengthening theoretical review, methodological design, and the importance of academic guidance. These strategies are complementary and collectively form a comprehensive framework for producing high-quality dissertation proposals.

Systematic Research Gap Analysis

A primary finding from the SLR emphasizes that identifying the research gap is the initial foundation that determines the success of a dissertation proposal. Nearly all analyzed articles highlight that doctoral students must not only collect literature but also map current research trends, identify inconsistencies among findings, and pinpoint areas of knowledge that have not been addressed in previous studies. This process ultimately produces a strong and focused problem statement. Therefore, the research gap serves as the main foundation for establishing the novelty of the research, which is a critical indicator of academic quality at the doctoral level.

Strengthening Theoretical Review through Literature Mapping

The SLR also revealed that a common weakness among doctoral students is the development of a descriptive rather than analytical theoretical review. To address this, various articles recommend using techniques such as literature mapping and compare-contrast matrices. These techniques help researchers organize theories, concepts, and empirical findings in a more structured manner. A theoretically organized review, based on an analytical approach, allows

researchers to position core and supporting theories according to their relevance, while building a robust theoretical framework as the foundation of the study.

Methodological Design Based on Problem Alignment

The third strategy frequently discussed in the literature is the importance of designing research methodology that is fully aligned with the characteristics of the research problem. The SLR shows that many proposals are rejected or require revision because their methodological design is inappropriate or insufficiently supports the problem statement. Therefore, method selection must consider the type of problem, the level of analysis, and the research design—whether quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods. This alignment ensures a clear research flow and enhances the validity of the findings.

Academic Guidance and Research Community Involvement

In addition to technical aspects of proposal writing, the SLR emphasizes the importance of academic support from the surrounding environment. Active supervision, research communities, scholarly discussion forums, and proposal-writing mentoring play a significant role in refining research ideas and reducing methodological errors. Strong academic guidance helps doctoral students conduct scientific reflection, develop logical arguments, and maintain the consistency and direction of their research.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this Systematic Literature Review demonstrate that the development of a high-quality dissertation proposal relies on four interrelated strategies that consistently appear in studies published between 2020 and 2024. First, a systematic research gap analysis is essential for establishing the novelty and academic contribution of a study, making it the primary foundation of doctoral-level research. Second, strengthening the theoretical review through structured literature mapping enables doctoral students to construct a coherent theoretical framework rather than producing merely descriptive summaries. Third, the methodological design must be carefully aligned with the characteristics of the research problem to ensure clarity, analytical coherence, and methodological validity. Lastly, academic guidance—through active supervision, research communities, and scholarly forums—plays a critical role in refining research ideas and preventing conceptual and methodological errors. Collectively, these four strategies form a comprehensive and integrative framework that supports doctoral students in producing rigorous, focused, and academically sound dissertation proposals.

FURTHER STUDY

This research still has limitations, so further research is needed regarding Effective Strategies in Writing a Dissertation Proposal in order to perfect this research and increase insight for readers.

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