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An Analysis of Salient Aspects of the Research Proposals of Fourth Year Student Social Workers: A Case Study of Class of 2019, University of Limpopo

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Abstract

Study topic selection and problem formulation are prerequisites in preparing a proposal for conducting research. Writing a research proposal to conduct research (for the first time) is a daunting task for (social work) students. The challenge is enormous despite numerous modules that introduce research to social work students. These problems were noted when student social workers presented their research proposals for the first time: broad and unclear research topics, difficulty in formulating research problems, and conflation of research approaches (qualitative and quantitative). Document analysis method was adopted in order to scrutinize research proposals to identify three key challenges such as topic selection, problem formulation, and research approach at proposal writing stage. A total of 10 fourth year social work students' research proposals were scrutinized. Thematic analysis was used to interpret findings. The study was qualitative in nature and informed by grounded theory as well as socio-cultural theory framework. Recommendations are proffered to mitigate the challenges experienced by social work students.

Keywords: undergraduate social work students, research proposals, University of Limpopo, students, research

1. Introduction and background

Social work in South Africa was introduced in the eighteenth century. Smith [1] reports that the first institution to offer social work in South Africa was the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 1924; and the university only trained white social work students. In 1929, the University of Pretoria (formerly known as Transvaal University College) started training social workers, the University of the Witwatersrand followed in 1937 [1]. These institutions focused exclusively on training white students in compliance with Apartheid education policy. Black social workers received training in 1941 after the establishment of Jan Hofmeyr College, the very first institution to train black social workers in South Africa. The famous graduates of Jan Hofmeyr (School of Social Work) include Winnie Madikizela Mandela, Ellen Kuzwayo, and Joshua Nkomo [1]. Alumni of Jan Hofmeyr School

of Social Work include inter alia Eduardo Chivambo Mondlane (founder member of Mozambique Liberation Front in 1962) and Molapatene Collins Ramusi (social worker, activist lawyer, politician, and author of Soweto my love 1989).

Many other institutions emerged after this, including the *University College of the North* (currently renamed the University of Limpopo) in 1959. At the University of Limpopo (former *University College of the North*) Department of Social Work, social work research module at undergraduate level was introduced in 1996. Prior to that, social workers graduated without having to present a research report or an extended essay.

This chapter reports on research conducted on a four-year undergraduate social work final year module called Research Project (HSKA040) pegged at NQF level 08. The module pursues the following five learning outcomes: (a) identify a research problem and plan the execution of the research project; (b) compile a relevant literature study; (c) appropriately collect data and analyze it; (d) present the research proposal; and (e) report the findings.

This report therefore concentrates on part of the first learning outcome; which involves topic selection, problem formulation, and research approach. In this regard, the researchers report on the outcome of the analysis of students' first draft proposals with special reference to the three constructs, namely topic selection, problem formulation, and research approach as the module's first learning outcome.

2. Statement of the problem

Planning a research project and preparing a proposal has never been a simple process, more especially for undergraduate students. Literature reports a myriad of factors that influence this activity such as blended learning [2]; GDP per capita spending on research [3]; under-preparedness of students [4]; research climate [5, 6] cut and paste [7]; infrastructure [7, 8] as well as climate, role clarity and research service quality [5]. It is not the intention of this work to dwell on these factors, but to report on findings regarding students' written drafts on topic selection, problem formulation, and research approach among others.

Proposal writing for social work undergraduate students is an academic activity that takes place at fourth (final) year level of Bachelor of social work training. Fourth year level is pitched at National Qualification Framework (NQF) level 8 and therefore has to align with the following level descriptors as envisaged in the South African Qualifications Authority [9]:

a. *Scope of knowledge*, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate knowledge of and engagement in an area at the forefront of a field, discipline, or practice; an understanding of the theories, research methodologies, methods and techniques relevant to the field, discipline or practice; and an understanding of how to apply such knowledge in a particular context.

b. *Problem solving*, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate the ability to use a range of specialized skills to identify, analyze, and address complex or abstract problems drawing systematically on the body of knowledge and methods appropriate to a field, discipline, or practice.

The researchers observed over the years that fourth year social work students at University of Limpopo struggle with writing research proposals to such an extent that their projects would be delayed and often overlap to the following academic year; a year in which they should be graduating, job hunting, or enrolling for

postgraduate studies. Challenges in writing skills could be attributed to the fact that "level descriptors for academic writing are rather vague, and have not been explicitly addressed" [9], a fact that may lead to delayed graduation, failure or eventual dropout for students [6].

The prospect of delay, failure, and eventual dropout caused concern among researchers. Evidently, most of these students are from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds; and spending an extra year on campus due to failing a module adds undesirable financial burdens. Besides, failing a fourth (final) year module also negatively affects the pass and throughput rates of the university, and in worse circumstances may lead to increased drop-out rate [10, 11].

A large body of research describes the following as common hurdles for novice researchers in earlier stages of research (proposal writing): broad and unclear research topics, confusion of research approaches, failure to state problem statement, poor understanding of the subject matter, and inappropriate referencing styles [12, 13]. The latter two issues will be subject of another paper, for now the spotlight will fall on the first three.

Challenges of studying in a second or third language have been reported in literature [4]. Qasem and Zayid [13] also found that undertaking research in a foreign language such as English is a problem for some students. This situation resembles experiences of the researchers in that all students reported in this article are African and English is their third and fourth language, a dimension that further conflates issues at conceptualisation stage. In order to overcome this hurdle, at the University of Limpopo, the Department of Social Work organizes preparatory writing seminars presented by academics from the English Department. This is augmented by students' voluntary and sometimes mandatory use of the Writing Centre whose *raison d'être is* to assist both undergraduate and postgraduate students with language-related issues.

Whereas an earlier study [14] focused on what students said about conducting research for the first time, this study analyzed students' first proposal drafts to identify some of the challenges in starting their research journey.

3. Theoretical framework

This study was guided by the grounded theory. This theory "provides a viable means for scholars and participants to generate a new and emic perspective, and to generate theory that is grounded in the realities of the participants' daily life experiences. A key feature of grounded theory is that it provides for inductive enquiry, a means of generating new theory and new understandings, and requires researchers to identify the research problem from the research participants' perspectives" [15].

On the other hand, researchers could not resist Vygotsky's [16] sociocultural theory to navigate the study. The theory posits that learning is an active process in which learners construct new ideas or concepts based upon their current and past knowledge.

4. Challenges of writing a research proposals for the first time: brief literature review

This section provides a review of pertinent literature regarding challenges and mistakes committed in writing research proposals by students. According to Pardede [17], a student's research proposal is the only document that can "demonstrate that he knows what he is seeking and how to successfully complete his

planned project". The implication is that a research proposal needs to be written skillfully so that a reader, often supervisor, will be able to see how the proposed project will be carried out "scientifically". Nevertheless, based on numerous studies that looked at first hand research proposals, it becomes clear that there are often teething problems [12, 14, 18].

A largescale study of 783 research proposals by Kikula and Quorro [18] found that writing a research proposal among students was not a simple thing in Tanzania. This was shown by students' inability to write clear research topics, presenting the real problem of the intended study, absent and unclear research methodologies. Mat Daud et al., [19] reached a conclusion that writing in a "second/foreign language" lead to anxiety. Qasem and Zayid [14] found that "around 70% of the participants who are writing research or conducting research projects in English, it is one of the predominant challenges for them". This may explain why the previous scholars found that students were unable to write clear research topics in English, or the overall research proposal.

One study argues that the reason students struggle with formulating problem statements in their research proposals may be associated with their own deeds, that is, poor reading habits; where extensive literature studies is not a norm at all [20].

When this is the case, the researchers suspect that students would commit plagiarism [21]; an activity that is likely to land students in trouble since using another person's work without acknowledging the rightful author is unethical [22]. Moreover, researchers hold that by plagiarizing the students would not be reflective and reflexive.

5. Objectives of the study

The study pursued the following objectives:

- To analyze fourth year social work students' research proposals' topic selection, problem formulation, and research approach and

- To generate recommendations for addressing emerging challenges.

6. Methodology

6.1 Research approach and design

A qualitative research paradigm was selected to guide the study through a case study design. The approach was selected since the researchers were not interested in quantifying issues, but to merely have an understanding of the issues at hand [23].

6.2 Population

The University of Limpopo has accommodated "40" fourth year social work students for the academic year 2019.

6.3 Sampling

A total of 10 social work students' first hand research proposals were targeted because they were readily available as a sample. To that end, first hand research

proposals that fourth year social work students had submitted to their respective supervisors for the very first time, and supervisors had not marked them yet were sampled. It is important to note the fact that fourth year social work students at University of Limpopo do research in pairs (or more). Therefore, one research proposal analyzed would have been prepared by more than one student.

6.4 Data collection

Data for this study was gleaned from students' proposals.

6.5 Analysis

Content thematic analysis method was used in analyzing data that was collected by the researchers. The following steps were adhered to in analyzing data [24]:

Phase one: Familiarizing oneself with data. The researchers started by collecting data, thereafter immersed themselves within it by frequently reading and searching for themes.

Phase two: Generating initial codes. After the researchers had familiarized themselves with the raw data, they began synthesizing codes for the first time to identify what was interesting about them [25]. The codes were produced from the data and collated.

Phase three: Searching for themes. Given the plenty of codes identified and collated in the aforesaid phase, a close examination was made to create overarching themes. This was achieved through the use of tables and mind-maps.

Phase four: Reviewing themes. Based on the sizeable number of themes that had emerged, the researchers began to review the themes at hand so as to refine them and remain with the most interesting and salient themes.

Phase five: Defining and naming themes. Having reviewed and refined the themes, the researchers named the emergent themes and paraphrased the most interesting and pertinent content of the data extracts. For each theme, the researchers made an analysis and put it in writing.

Phase six: Producing the report. After identifying a set of fully worked-out themes, the researchers made a final analysis and compiled a report to present findings in the form of themes.

7. Description of the sample

It was not possible to verify the demographic attributes of the sample such as age, gender, and marital status of the participants since researchers simply analyzed documents; and the participants were therefore anonymous. One thing though, is certain, that the sample under investigation was fourth year social work students (**Table 1**).

No. of males	No. of females	Qualifications	Number of years teaching
4	4	Bachelor of Social work	0–10 years
		Master of Social work	11–20 years
		Doctor of Philosophy	21–30 years

Table 1.
Staff supervising students' research projects.

8. Key findings

In line with the objective(s) of the study, the following themes emerged from analysis:

1. Broad and unclear research topics

2. Difficulty in formulating statement of the problem

3. Confusion of research approaches

9. Broad and unclear research topics

It is a common understanding among researchers that an area of investigation needs to be clearly demarcated to be able to meet objective(s) of the study [12]. When this is ignored, the researchers argue that such a study would lack direction. Nevertheless, for some social work students, this is not something to worry about, which then makes a topic not researchable, and ultimately delaying their progress in case the problem is not picked up early (by supervisors) (**Table 2**). Extracts of research topics (problem statements as well as research approaches) from social work students' research proposals are presented in the **Table 2**.

An analysis of social work students' first proposal drafts shows that study topics are broad and not that crystal clear. However, such attempts are really laudable because subsequent submissions coupled with supervision (individual and group) will certainly improve these topics. A look at the first topic "*Challenges faced by youth after leaving Foster Care in Limpopo province*" shows that the scope of the study is broad. This is due to the fact that Limpopo is a province with more than one million people. The province is further divided into several districts and towns, townships as well as villages in each district. Thus, it would be more appropriate for the students to indicate specifically where (village/district) the study will take place, namely, study setting, or targeted population (the name of the province could still be mentioned in the title).

Zooming in on topic 2 "*Factors contributing to family break down [sic] in Sibasa,*" it is clear that the same issues raised in the previous title could still be found. In this case, this title brings about questions because it is not indicated in which province or district Sibasa is found, thus leaving the reader to imagine. This attracts criticism of the topic, which is then likely to cause a delay in the progress of the research proposal. This would consequently delay students' completion of studies on record time.

Topic 3, "*The attitudes, perceptions, and cultural factors that affect the use of contraceptives amongst students at the University of Limpopo.*" As the topic presents itself, it is verbose, confusing and therefore unclear as to what really the students wish to investigate. The topic has three interrelated concepts (attitudes, perceptions and cultural factors). Pursuit of all three may not be to the students' advantage in terms of the time available to conduct this study. The student would be advised to pursue one construct, because research at this stage is not expected to be robust; but rather to expose students to the research process.

Similarly, topic 4 "*Challenges and perceptions on students living with disabilities at University of Limpopo Turfloop campus*" is not different from topic 3, because the students talk about "challenges and perceptions". In essence, perception as an abstract term fits in one umbrella word, namely, challenges. In this case a dissection

	Research topics	Statement of the problem	Research approach
1.	*"Challenges faced by youth after leaving Foster Care in Limpopo province"*	*"Foster care dependents are recipients of foster care grant and upon aging out of Foster Care, it means that no more financial support or security. Other factors contributing to lack of finances are unemployment and dropping out of school. These will result in them having to look for means of getting money for survival. Some will resort to crime, some engaging with 'sugar daddies/mamas' or 'Blessers' or even worse prostitution. This will result in them abusing drugs and alcohol."*	*Qualitative approach*
2.	*"Factors contributing to family break down [sic] in Sibasa"*	*"The research problem for this study is that there are factors contributing to family breakdown at Sibasa community of which majority of families are not aware of whereas minority are aware of those factors contributing to family breakdowns but decide to them for grated (sic) by ignoring them."*	*Qualitative approach*
3.	*"The attitudes, perceptions, and cultural factors that affect the use of contraceptives among students at the University of Limpopo"*	*"The researcher's interest was raised through curiosity of how people; especially university students are still falling pregnant despite the availability of contraceptives. Education on contraceptives and safe sex is given yet they still have unplanned pregnancies due to the overwhelming responsibility and pressure that comes with having a child at a young age. The researcher saw a need to conduct a research on the perceptions that these university students have towards the use of contraceptives and taking precautions when engaging in sexual relationships."*	*Qualitative approach*
4.	*"Challenges and perceptions on students living with disabilities at University of Limpopo Turfloop campus"*	*"It will look to the phenomenon about the challenges faced by students having disability and mostly those who are having motor impairment blind, the challenges they face and how are they working to address such challenges they face academic wise social wise and environmentally. And how other student perceive them."*	*qualitative approach*
5.	*"The effects of divorce among spouses, siblings and in-laws"*	*"With respect to academic and social relationship outcomes (including romantic relationships), adolescence were, however found to be more a risk."*	*Qualitative approach*
6.	*"The effects of bullying on learners at mountain view [sic] secondary school: The teachers [sic] perspective"*	*"Bullied students have difficulty in making friends. They have poor relationships with classmates. Bullies have problem behaviors such as smoking and drinking alcohol. Victims of bullying are weak, shy and anxious; their school performance is poor and lead to absenteeism."*	*Qualitative approach*
7.	*"The effects of alcohol consumption on the academic performance of students in the University of Limpopo"*	*"Students engage in alcohol and drug use to help them cope with academic stress, negative emotions and make them look mature."*	*Qualitative approach*
8.	*"The social effect [sic] of gang violence among the community of Seshego zone 2"*	*"Gangs annoy people through increased level of crime, violence and murder. Members of gangs are more likely dropouts from school, struggle with employment and abuse drugs and alcohol. Tax payers forced to contribute to their welfare through community assistance programmes."*	*Qualitative approach*
9.	*"Experiences of child headed [sic] families regard [sic] to Social work services at Mankweng"*	*"Such children or households experience usually high level of psychological distress because they are exposed to more stressful events and more on-going strain in a form of having no income... I will therefore find reasons for it to be investigated in order to understand and know more."*	*Qualitative approach*

Research topics		Statement of the problem	Research approach
10.	*"Experiences of foster parents in Mapapila Village"*	*"Some foster parents lack support from families. Comparison of the behaviors between their own children and those they are fostering it (sic) creates psychological conflicts and they hardly share their experiences because of the stigma in our societies of that when you correct the behavior of the child that is not yours you do not love them or you are punishing them."*	*Qualitative approach*

Table 2.
Research topic, statement of the problem, and research approach.

of the topic *per se* implies that social work students wish to investigate the "broad challenges" that disabled students encounter on campus, which axiomatically would be linked to certain cultural views or "perceptions". Hence the term "challenges" in case of this study may be representative of myths and perceptions.

As for topic 5 on *"The effects of divorce among spouses, siblings and in-laws."* In terms of family law, *"spouses, siblings and in-laws"* are broadly referred to as extended family. Thus this topic is verbose and may simply be trimmed down to extended family (where everyone in the family tree is catered for). Therefore, from topic 1 to 5 it is evident that the research topics are broad. That notwithstanding, the students could be commended for having developed a "scientific consciousness" about social problems in their own communities. This of course would dovetail with the tenets of sociocultural theory, that students' learning is influenced by their current and past knowledge.

Topic 6: *"The effects of bullying on learners at mountain view [sic] secondary school: The teachers [sic] perspective."* Whereas the topic may sound fair, however, the effects of bullying may be psychological, physical and so forth. This means the students would be advised to be specific. Interestingly, all topics from 5 to 8 seek to study "effects" of a certain phenomenon, not to mention the fact that they are much related/interrelated. For example, *effects of divorce among parents* may be observed to result in bully children in schools; expanding to alcohol abuse by students (children); students forming or joining gangs and so on, which interestingly becomes a vicious circle. Thus, one study (e.g. on effects of divorce among spouses) may factor in all effects sought to be studied by other social work students. One could also mention that the topics are more towards social science and show no bent towards social work. Social work is an applied discipline, and one would not be satisfied with identifying effects of phenomena without intervention.

Lastly, both topics 9 and 10 look at the *experiences* of child-headed families and foster care parents. The two may be viewed as "antonyms", because child-headed families imply that children stay in the house without parents, whereas foster parents play a role of parenting in the case of children without biological parents. Therefore, it is highly likely that one study (child-headed families) will have similarities with the other, not to mention the fact that both studies will be undertaken in the same province. Apart from this, one would learn that this study titled *"Experiences of child headed [sic] families regard [sic] to Social work services at Mankweng"* is ambiguous, therefore unclear. On the face of it, the grammar is incorrect.

10. Difficulty in formulating statement of the problem

The analysis showed that social work students struggle with presentation of a problem statement in their research proposals; a finding that corroborates a study

conducted by Sithole [14] at University of Limpopo. It came out quite clear that the students present solutions in the problem statement instead of presenting the *real problem*, which in essence is the one that warranted the research proposal.

A topic on *"The effects of bullying on learners at mountain view [sic] secondary school: the teachers (sic) perspective"* was proposed. However, the students instead of adhering to the problem statement of the subject, they get sidetracked. Here follows an extract to demonstrate this:

> *"Bullying can be physical, such as when a learner is kicked, pushed or punched. It can also be verbal; for example when a learner or leaners spread malicious gossip about another learner with intention to make them suffer emotionally. Other forms of bullying include emotional bullying, when a learner makes comment of the personal characteristics of other learners such as disability or ethnicity, with the intention of making those learners feel uncomfortable about themselves."*

A close scrutiny of the above extract makes it very clear that the students are now explaining forms of bullying and how such happens, rather than sticking to what the problem is. Another part of the problem statement from the same study title reads as follows:

> Bullied students have difficulty in making friends. They have poor relationships with classmates. Bullies have problem behaviours such as smoking and drinking alcohol. Victims of bullying are weak, shy and anxious; their school performance is poor and lead to absenteeism.

One could raise the question, if these are the effects of bullying, what do the students then wish to know? Perhaps, the student would obviate this question by justifying in the statement of problem why it is necessary to conduct this study in Mountain View school. Reasons such as the following could be used as justification: the demographics of previous studies are completely different from what obtains in Mountain View school; previous studies used a different research approach, methods, theoretical framework/conceptual framework.

In another research proposal titled *"Factors contributing to family break down [sic] in Sibasa,"* it was found that students commit the same mistake others had committed in the previous study (on bullying).

> *"It was observed that there are countless numbers of families facing family breakdown in Sibasa community. This study will be conducted in order to produce knowledge to understand the factors contributing to family breakdown at Sibasa community. Previous research has established that family breakdown is caused by various factors such as, domestic violence, death of a family member, socioeconomic, gender inequality, and difference in lifestyle."*

Perhaps the students' statement of the problem could be phrased differently, that:

> Previous studies acknowledge domestic violence, death of a family member, socioeconomic, gender inequality, and difference in lifestyle as causes of family breakdown, and the student wishes to find out if break down in Sibasa is caused by the same factors or are there other factors that literature did not report on.

As it could be clearly seen in the extract, the students state the significance of their proposed study under a section where strictly problem statement should be discussed.

11. Research approaches

Interestingly, in all social work research proposals analyzed, it was found that students chose uniform research approaches, namely, qualitative approach. It may not be difficult to fathom why these students choose the same research approaches. The researchers do suspect that such a case could be caused by peer pressure, if not students' supervisors' influences on how to write a research proposal (that will not prolong one's stay on campus as a student). The researchers observed the fact that at times supervisors meet with students before writing "first time proposals" to discuss issues related to proposal writing. Thus, it is likely that supervisors might have an influence on the choice of methodology/approach that these social work students chose.

Moreover, with the background that fourth year social work students usually have a high workload [14], then they are more likely to (be influenced) to choose a research methodology (even a topic) that would not delay completion of their studies. Given the fact that fourth year social work students begin their research projects nearly at the beginning of their second semester, where they have only 6 months (or less) to complete their studies (and every student would wish to complete his/her studies on (record) time) (**Table 3**).

Researchers note that some social work students struggle to differentiate on the application of qualitative and quantitative research. This can be seen in the (above) table that: on number 1 the students mentioned that their approach will be qualitative but their data collection tools/method is quantitative in nature. The researchers mention this because "close-ended and questionnaire" are tools for quantitative research. Again, the students without stating in the approach section that their study will adopt a mixed method research design, they go on to say that "*for the closed-ended questions, the quantitative research method will be used.*" In the second row of the table, number 2, it is clear that a qualitative research approach was selected; however, the students talk about questionnaires and yielding "...*responses that are usually easy to tabulate or score*..."; concepts that are completely quantitative in nature and intending to measure certain occurrences/phenomenon, which is not what qualitative research pursues (namely, understanding phenomenon).

In the last row number 3, the same mistakes that students committed in other research proposals (row 1 and 2) can be found, that questionnaires are going to be used to collect data, whereas the selected research approach is qualitative, therefore interviews, observations, and focus groups seem to be the (only) choice for the students.

Research approach	Data collection method
1. "*The research approach will be the* **qualitative research** *paradigm*"	"*The data will be collected by means of a structured (closed – ended) questionnaire and open ended questions. For the closed – ended questions, the quantitative research method will be used*"
2. "**Qualitative research approach** *will be adopted for the purpose of this study*"	"*Questionnaires will also be used as a data collection method for this study. Questionnaires yield responses that are usually easy to tabulate or score and the resulting data are easy to analyze (Patten, 2017)*"
3. "*As we have stated the study will be* **qualitative** *in a sense that it purpose is to try and present data in a holistically view of a social phenomenon Which in this case is disability (sic)*"	"*Questionnaire is going to be the tool for collecting data, because it gives those people who are shy an opportunity to full express (sic) themselves without being watched... Questioners are easy to answer within a single day (sic) you could reach the whole targeted population*"

Table 3.
Research approach and data collection method.

12. Conclusion

Writing a proposal in preparation for conducting research is often overwhelming for undergraduate students who are confronted with this task for the first time. The challenge is more than the mundane assignment, tests, and quizzes. Unlike what students are expected to do generally at undergraduate level, most students would be expected to translate knowledge into praxis. For those students who did not master the research material well, more especially the basic research concepts, the translation of knowledge gathered in lecture halls to an applied context is daunting.

Students of course react differently to the challenge. Others would stick it out, burn the candle on both ends to ensure that mastery of the content takes place. These students normally present proposals with genuine structural or content weaknesses which would be corrected on subsequent supervision sessions with the lecturers. Inevitable delays notwithstanding, these students would learn and internalize the research concepts and apply them even beyond their undergraduate classes to doctoral level. On the flip side of the coin, one has a group of students who are uncomfortable with challenges and find an easier (shorter) way around preparing the proposal through cut and paste, reproduce and plagiarize the entire proposal from the internet or whatever source, or ask a friend or whoever to do it for them in return for cash or kind. These students produce very "impressive" proposals at first attempt, but check them in your Master's class the following year, they are nowhere to be found.

Consistent with the underpinnings of sociocultural theory, almost all students wish to research on issues that they are confronted with daily. The setback though is that undergraduate students almost invariably write proposals on what was researched before, particularly within the Department of Social Work. Of all the topics presented in this study, surely there is a research report lying somewhere on campus on a similar study. There does not seem to be growth and creativity, notwithstanding the fact that extended essays were introduced more than 15 years ago at fourth year level.

As noted, quite a few topics are misaligned to the research approaches; however, the hiatus between the two is easy to bridge. As far as this aspect is concerned, one could acknowledge growth and development. At introduction of extended essays, helping the students align their study title, problem statement or research question was a challenge.

A more worrying factor, associated with the previous one is the proclivity towards providing solutions where a problem statement is required. Perhaps social work training makes it difficult to stay and confront a problematic situation. In order to resolve this seemingly perennial problem, students would be advised to wear science caps and put down therapist orientation when they conduct research. Such a feat may also be difficult to attain when one considers the fact that the students are deeply immersed in qualitative research.

From all the proposals analyzed, the research approach in each is qualitative. This could be that students find it easier to grasp qualitative methods because of their nature and resonance with most modules in the humanities. Another reason could be that supervisors are more entrenched in qualitative methods and influence students to select same. However, a balanced student must be literate in both qualitative and quantitative research.

Language issues were noted from some proposals. Yet these were not so serious, and could be easily ironed out. For students whose first language is not English, one could safely infer that the proposals read fairly well, and for this feat the seminar hosted by colleagues in the English Department and the Writing Centre are commended.

Coupled with language issues, is inclination to pursue more than one construct, such as perceptions, attitudes, and behavior. For purposes of research at this stage of the students' development, one would advise that one issue/construct/problem be pursued instead of a multiplicity.

Finally, and perhaps more controversial is that the student topics were largely social science based and never transcended into social work discipline. Social work is a practice based profession and goes beyond analysis of problems to intervention. The adage "social work is about social work issues" is more applicable here.

13. Recommendations

Based on what the study found, it is recommended that:

- Students begin their research projects much earlier than their fourth year for more time to come to grips with research.

- Students proposals must be swayed towards social work research.

- Continued hosting of English seminars and referral to the Writing Center is encouraged.

- Students need to be exposed to quantitative research methods.

14. Limitations of the study

The study relied solely on analysis of fourth year social work students' research proposals. As such, students' personal experiences on writing research proposals could not be explored such as reasons for choosing uniform research approaches, topics and so on. Moreover, the study was only carried out at University of Limpopo, Department of Social Work, hence its findings may not generalize social work students from other institutions (but may shed some light). Lastly, there was a shred of literature to consult that focused specifically on the subject investigated.

15. For further research

For future research, the following may be considered:

- An empirical study of fourth year social work students' views and challenges of writing research proposals for the first time at University of Limpopo.

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Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to report.

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