Management Learning

An Approach to Preparing Research Proposals

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An Approach to Preparing Research Proposals

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Introduction

In many courses, students are required to complete a dissertation which involves some field research. It has been my experience that when a student begins to plan his first research project, he finds the process a little baffling. He is not quite sure what he is supposed to be aiming for, and he is uncertain about what factors to take into account in his planning.

In order to facilitate preliminary decisions about feasibility, and the allocation of a supervisor, a student is commonly asked to produce a written statement about the project he is proposing to undertake. I think it can be very useful, therefore, for the student to be given some kind of structure for his proposal at this stage. It will help him to clarify and organise this thinking, it will direct his attention to salient issues in conducting a piece of individual research, and it will enable him to gain specific feedback from his supervisor and other resource persons at an early stage in his schedule. As far as course organisers are concerned, it will provide data which are useful for their task of monitoring project development. The format given below is an example of such a structure.

A format for preparing research proposals
1. *Title:* A brief description of the research, which will communicate your purposes and plans to any person who may read your final research report.
2. *Immediate purposes of the research:* A statement of what you intend to find out, or demonstrate, by means of the research (e.g. you may be interested in discovering the antecedents of some existing state of affairs; or, in how a particular state of affairs might be created; or, in what the relations are between two variables; or, in how some variable might be measured).
3. *Wider purposes of the research:* A statement of the scientific and/or practical contribution you would like to make through conducting this research.
   (a) *Scientific contribution:* How your findings might further an understanding of the phenomena you are investigating, through replicating, disconfirming, or, adding to, the results from other research.
   (b) *Practical contribution:* How your findings might help to solve a problem, or assist in the achievement of a goal desired by some person, group, or organisation.
4. *Theoretical foundations:* An indication of the theoretical models and major assumptions that will underlie the research.
5. *Research plan:* A summary of the steps you propose to take, in order to obtain the information from which you will draw your conclusions. This summary should include, where relevant, descriptions of:
   (a) The situation/entities you will investigate;

(b) The data-collection and measurement procedures you will use;

(c) The kind of statistical analyses you will perform.

6. *Implementation of the research plan:* A statement of how you will set up or gain access to the situation you wish to investigate, and gain the co-operation of the persons who will be involved.

7. *Overall schedule for the research:* A list of your deadlines, in the form of calendar dates, for each phase of your investigation, up to submission of the report or dissertation.

8. *Resources required for the research:* A statement of what you will need in order to carry out the investigation, and how you plan to cover these needs (e.g. specialist help, equipment, travel allowances, etc.).

9. *Contingency plans:* A statement of the problems you may encounter during the investigation, and what you will do in order to produce a viable project if your initial plans break down at a critical point.

Comments

This format can be modified to suit particular kinds of research, and the requirements of specific courses. Also, within a course it can serve a useful bridging function between research methodology seminars and individual project planning.

Research at any level involves several cycles of planning. Further, ideas can only be improved upon when they are made explicit enough for their weaknesses to become apparent. So, the discipline of preparing a brief proposal (two or three sentences under the relevant headings) within each cycle of planning can be a valuable catalyst in the research process. In the early stages of planning, preliminary exploration and data collection can be very important in shaping the form of the final objectives and plans. The efficiency of this exploration can be greatly increased if the student has explicated his ideas in the form of a proposal. The process of clarification will lead to the student's attention being directed to potentially relevant issues, as opposed to interesting but irrelevant issues.

Finally, in the later stages of developing research plans, particularly if the project is going to involve a heavy investment of resources, a more substantial and detailed proposal will be in order. It will help both student and supervisor to assess whether the project is viable, and so increase the likelihood that the student will be successful in his task, and avoid becoming yet another 'drop-out'.