



## Challenges faced by postgraduate distance students in research proposal writing: A case of the institute of distance education of the University of Zambia

PC Manchishi, D Ndhlovu, Dr. W Phiri\*, LP Thomson

Institute of Distance Education, the University of Zambia, Zambia

### Abstract

Universities all over the world require that their postgraduate students submit well researched quality theses in order for them to graduate with desired academic qualification. Drawing on social dilemma theory and Tinto (1975) Integration Model, the aim of the study was to understand what challenges UNZA-ZOU postgraduate distance students faced in research proposal writing. Based on a literature review and by the use of a descriptive case study, Tinto (1975) model is adapted in this study to integrate demographic, individual characteristics that affect postgraduate distance students from writing quality research proposal papers. A sample of 120 participants from the UNZA-ZOU postgraduate distance students in Zambia was used to study the above topic. Qualitative data were used to elaborate and explain quantitative results' findings. Study findings pinpoint towards the general barriers to postgraduate distance students research proposal writing skills. The significant identified barriers to postgraduate distance students' quality research proposal writing skills are: inadequate of time as research proposal writing is combined with other modules, lack of research proposal writing skills on the part of postgraduate distance students, students' poor attitude towards research proposal writing, and low engagement frequency levels ( $r = 0.357$ ) of some supervisors with students. The study further established that most immediate past studies analyzed ( $\mu = 5.84$ ,  $\sigma = 3.16$ ,  $N = 61$ ) rejected their  $H_0$  by assuming that students pursuing postgraduate studies do Posses adequate research skills yet in fact to the contrary. However, this study has established that inadequate skills in research methodology among postgraduate distance students is a significant factor (i.e.  $P_v < \alpha$ ;  $0.001 < 0.05$ ). The study equally noted with concern that research memorandum of understanding plan between a supervisor and student were not encouraged or inexistence. This trend did not only affected UNZA-ZOU postgraduate master's programme but a similar trend remained true in most universities (63/68 = 92.6% of the registered universities with HEA in Zambia). The study made the following recommendations: 1. The University of Zambia And Zimbabwe Open University Through Institute of Distance Education should allocate more time to the research module. 2. Supervisors should have frequent engagement with students. 3. The University of Zambia and Zimbabwe Open University through the Institute of Distance Education should introduce weekend sessions in all provincial centres for the students who need help. 4. Research memorandum of understanding plans should be promoted by institutions of higher learning including UNZA-ZOU.

**Keywords:** research proposal, postgraduate, distance education

### 1. Introduction

Zambian universities like other universities in the world require that postgraduate students submit well researched 'quality' papers called dissertations or theses in order for them to graduate with desired academic qualification. Thomas (2009) [18] described a thesis as a lengthy academic paper or dissertation based on original research, especially as work geared towards an academic degree. On this argument, James and Slater (2013) [7] state that thesis writing is the creation of a research project or dissertation that generally involves an empirical investigation of specific question(s) within the field of one's study. The common theme to all these writing according to Asogwa *et al.* (2014) [1] is to expand students' understanding within the field of study and be equipped with the knowledge and skills in conducting research, teaching, textbook and paper writing.

However, in Zambian universities, it has been noted that thesis writing especially the first part, the thesis proposal is not an easy understanding by most postgraduate students. What

compounds this is the fact that thesis writing varies significantly from institutions of higher learning, thesis committee and supervisors, thereby making it difficult to describe procedures that are applied to all students. What is more is the fact that postgraduate students who apply to pursue their postgraduate studies come from different institutions' background where they did their undergraduate studies. Pearson (2005) [16] postulated that students found thesis writing as the most challenging part of postgraduate studies. In line with (*ibid*), [16] it has been noted that most of the postgraduate distance students pursuing their studies with UNZA-ZOU have been having a lot of challenges with thesis writing more especially in the research proposal stage. This is supported by Olaitan *et al.* (2009) [14] who stated that the challenges faced by students in research range from inability to select a researchable topic, the lack of resource materials, hostile attitude of supervisors, the lack of will power on the side of the students, the lack of finance, and ill health among others. Despite a lot of interventions on the part of UNZA-

ZOU, this problem is escalating. It should be mentioned here that among the interventions which the institutions had put in place was to allow distance postgraduate students submit well researched academic long papers without them undertaking a research. However, this proved to be problematic as most postgraduate still submitted long papers that did not meet the standards for academic papers. In addition, UNZA-ZOU also tried conducting coaching clinics on academic research papers but the problem is still ongoing, hence, there was need to undertake this particular study that explored the challenges which distance postgraduate students face in research paper writing more especially research proposals. Suffice to note further that postgraduate students on distance mode of study prepare research proposal soon after being oriented in research module. The preparation duration has eight slots within a space of two weeks which is not adequate especially for those students who may be experiencing inadequacies in research skills. Despite measures already alluded above aimed at alleviating the poor proposal writing, the problem has however continued.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

The study conducted by Manchishi, Ndhlovu and Mwanza, (2015) <sup>[11]</sup> did acknowledge that most students at postgraduate level do not do well in proposal writing. The University of Zambia in collaboration with Zimbabwe Open University through Institute of Distance Education commenced in 2014 postgraduate distance programmes. Teasing out preliminary reactions from supervisors indicate that postgraduate distance students on these programmes do face challenges in proposal writing. This trend sometimes leads to the student's research study being delayed and in worst scenario leading to them not graduating on time. In some extreme cases, this also leads to some of the distance students to withdraw from their studies due to frustrations as they cannot continue with their dissertation to obtain their intended certificate, even when they had passed their course works creditably (Asogwa *et al*, 2014) <sup>[1]</sup>. In addition, in a study undertaken by Mapolisa and Mafa (2013) <sup>[12]</sup> that sought to explore challenges being experienced by distance students were of the view that

distance students are mature and very much willing to conduct research in their respective fields as well as lecturers and tutors alike being relatively mature, qualified and experienced to supervise research study projects. Now, one would wonder what makes postgraduate distance students have difficulties with research proposal writing. Therefore, the problem still remains unanswered: What are the challenges being faced by postgraduate distance students in writing research proposal?

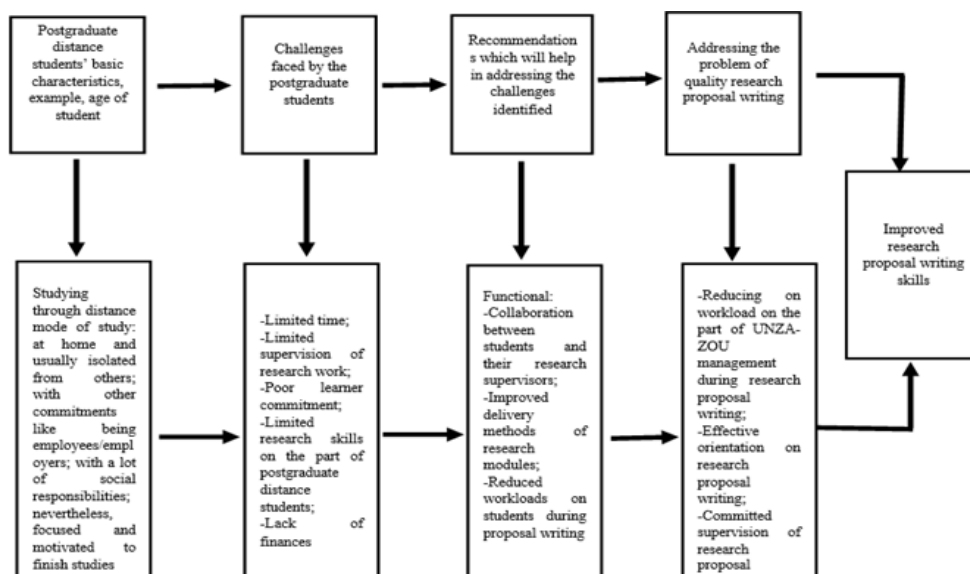
### 1.2 Research Objectives

This research study was guided by the following specific objectives

- To establish the major challenges faced by postgraduate distance students in proposal and dissertation writing.
- To determine whether lecturers, tutors and/or research module have an effect on students' preparations on proposal and dissertation writing.
- To gather views on measures needed to be put in place in order to address the challenges identified.

### 1.3 Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework that was used to guide this research study is premised on the understanding that the UNZA-ZOU enrolls postgraduate students who are both young adults and old who study through distance mode of study. These students come from all over the country as well as from other foreign surrounding countries. Some of the areas which these students come from are rural while other areas are urban. It has been observed by UNZA-ZOU management and its teaching staff that some students frequently face a number of challenges that prevent them from producing quality research proposals and ultimately their completion of studies within the stipulated duration, mostly two years or two and half years. Literature has identified a number of challenges which are worth focusing on. These include financial difficulties, limited time on the part of the student, and scarcity of study materials, isolation, limited supervision, and limited research skills among students (Rwejuna, 2013) <sup>[17]</sup>. Thus, the theoretical framework that was used in this research study is diagrammatically presented as shown below:



**Fig 1:** Adapted from Tinto Integration Model (1975) as cited by Rwejuna (2013: 33)<sup>[17]</sup>

### 1.4 Significance of the Study

It was envisaged that this study was going to be significant in the sense that its findings would establish the challenges faced by postgraduate distance students in research proposal writing and thus help in finding the solutions to the challenges faced by the distance students. In other words, the findings contained herein may help UNZA-ZOU management find lasting solutions which may help in addressing the identified challenges. Moreover, there is a contribution to the body of knowledge in the already existing literature and thus it will provide important information on benchmarking which is an important tool for reviewing and comparing practices of other institutions of higher learning (Falkner, 2005).<sup>[5]</sup>

### 2. Literature Review

Relevant literature was reviewed guided by the research questions for qualitative data and hypothesis for quantitative data. A study by Manchishi, Ndlovu and Mwanza (2015: 1)<sup>[11]</sup> 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' mistakes in writing the proposal included: broad and unclear topics, failure to state the problem, failure to identify the gap in the literature, using wrong methodology, misunderstanding research terminology, wrong referencing style and plagiarism...the challenges which students faced included: unavailability of lecturers for consultations, negative comments from supervisors, and limited time in which to write the proposal, lack of materials and lack of co-ordination between DRGS, Assistant Dean- School of Education and the Lecturers/supervisors..." It must be noted however that above study targeted regular or full time post graduate students in the school of education, hence it did not include distance students. Therefore, there was an urgent need to explore challenges faced by distance students in proposal and thesis writing at postgraduate level.

Moreover, a further scrutiny of the University of Zambia's motto, "Service and excellence" tells a lot as regards to quality. In other words, stakeholders from all walks of life expect the university to remain focused on its two major principles of being responsive to the real needs of Zambians and champion the respect and proper recognition of the university world (MOE, 1996).<sup>[13]</sup> The emphasis is on their effective contribution in the development of society, the quality of their products; graduates, research and service which must be of high standard. Consequently, the government of the Republic of Zambia holds the University of Zambia in high esteem and expects that teaching, research and service are of such high standards that merit and win the respect of the university world whereas their teaching and research programmes were expected to be responsive to real needs of society (ibid.).<sup>[13]</sup> In other words, there should be no compromise when it comes to the quality of proposal writing because in all true sense, quality transcends quantity.

Although some studies have been conducted in the field of quality assurance, it seems most of the studies have focused on the definitions and relevance but little has been done to study the stakeholders' perceptions and the quality of proposal

writing (Kahsay, 2012)<sup>[8]</sup>. The literature related to the study seems to suggest in part that some of the challenges associated with the quality of proposal writing are related to misunderstandings between students and supervisors (De Vos, 2015)<sup>[4]</sup>. The quality of the research proposal writing in other respects reflects the level of supervision. For example, one scholar pointed out that the challenges students face in writing proposals are often made more difficult by the fact that supervisors have tacit knowledge of the features and approaches to proposal writing that they do not communicate to students (ibid.)<sup>[4]</sup>. The aforementioned challenges can cause a strong sense of isolation especially to international and distance students. According to Lumadi (2008)<sup>[10]</sup>, some students have complained of not being able to contact supervisors and waiting long periods of time to get feedback. Students should be allowed to share both problems and solutions; this will later help to building their confidence (ibid)<sup>[10]</sup>.

Previous studies further propose prompt feedback, regular meetings, and appropriate expertise of the supervisor...were cardinal to the quality of research proposal students will write. In as much as international students did not have ample time; distance students too have limited time, an issue which has to be adequately addressed. As a result of the notable challenges and the demanding nature of research proposal writing, Murray (2007) in De Vos (2015)<sup>[4]</sup> suggests holding writing clinics within the departments will help students acquire the necessary writing skills essential in research proposal writing. Of course the need for students of diverse backgrounds to write quality research proposal is not a matter of academic debate rather a discharge of a part of the university' responsibilities. The maintenance of quality and excellence by universities in their work is of utmost importance if they are to make a meaningful and effective contribution to the development of society and poor quality research proposal writing has been cited to do disservice to society (UNESCO, 1991)<sup>[19]</sup>.

For a long time, studies have been conducted pertaining to the quality of university education mainly at global level. Some of the results of the findings show that research capabilities have declined dramatically (ibid.)<sup>[19]</sup>. Africa has been cited to have an urgent need to undertake in-depth reforms of higher education although the task was reportedly not simple (ibid.)<sup>[19]</sup>. Universities in Africa and Zambia in particular are not closely linked to their environments as if they were not African, with very little relevance to the African context; largely characterized with external models. We therefore need to change this phenomenon and align what is being learnt to its use. Universities despite promoting interaction cannot be diverted from their basic ideals such as the free expression of ideas, academic freedom and autonomy all of which represent their real existence. Other studies carried out in Latin America show that the ongoing transformation of higher education has contributed to the explosion of the system through the amplification of institutional basis, mystification of enrolments, increased diversity in terms of programmes being offered and student types... (ibid)<sup>[19]</sup>.

In our effort to investigate the challenges faced by

postgraduate distance students in proposal writing at UNZA-ZOU, it was imperative to undertake this study because it included the study of the environment as it is believed that positive learning outcomes can only be achieved in a quality learning environment which includes physical, psychological and service delivery elements (UNESCO, 1991) [19]. Perhaps, there could be some other foreseeable factors which contribute to the much bemoaned quality of education let alone quality of research proposal writing. We must point out here that the central business of an education institution like UNZA-ZOU is to ensure quality. In other words, universities exist to offer quality education. Thus, there is no room for compromise. It was becoming evident that distant students were in one way or the other somehow not accorded much time and exposure to the contact research sessions due to the limited time during residential tutorials or time spent on campus. Despite the fact that students should remain committed to their academic work, research proposal writing does not only need adequate exposure but also enough guidance. In this vein students' proposal writing are supposed to be supervised by expert staff. Perhaps the stakeholders' perceptions pertaining to quality may arise due to the assumed heavy workloads on the part of academic staff. Therefore, something must be done to ensure the quality of research proposal writing was not compromised regardless of the class of researchers; distance or regular because the quality effectiveness of any higher institution of learning is totally depended on the quality of knowledge it was able to generate.

### 3. Research Methodology

This research study was a descriptive case study and both qualitative and quantitative methodologies were used in the collection of data. The target population for the study was all

UNZA-ZOU postgraduate distance students at Masters Level. The sample size for the study consisted of one hundred and twenty (120) participants. The simple random sampling technique was used to select students to participate in the study in order to accord everyone equal chances of participating in the study. Data for the study were collected using a self-administered questionnaire and interview guide. The study adhered to all ethical issues such as participants' names kept anonymous, confidentiality and consent of respondents to participate in the study was sought.

### 4. Findings

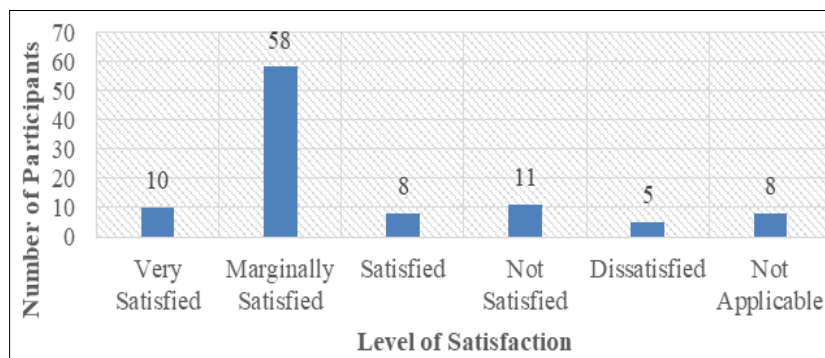
The findings were presented according to the research objectives. However, we start with presentation of participants' demographic data.

#### 4.1 Challenges Facing Participants in Research Proposal Writing

In presenting data on the challenges facing students in research proposal writing, this study presents the data in line with the following variables: level of participants' satisfaction in terms of their adequacy in being prepared for research writing; participants' level of satisfaction in terms of the research module used for instructions in research writing; and challenges which participants encounter as they write their research proposals.

##### 4.1.1: Participants' Level of Satisfaction in terms of being prepared for Proposal and Dissertation Writing

Participants in this research study were asked about their perception on how adequate they were prepared for proposal and dissertation writing. Their responses are as shown in the diagram below:



Source: Field Data, 2018

Fig 2: Showing Participants' Level of Satisfaction in terms of being prepared for Proposal Writing

Figure 2 above shows that the majority of the participants, 58 (representing 58%) claimed that they were marginally satisfied with their being prepared for proposal and dissertation writing techniques. However, 11 (representing 11%) participants claimed that they were not satisfied with the way they were being prepared for proposal writing. Nevertheless, 10 participants (representing 10%) indicated that they were very satisfied with the way they were being prepared for proposal writing. Moreover, 8% of the participants indicated that they were satisfied with the preparations for proposal writing. 5% of participants indicated

that they were dissatisfied with preparations for proposal writing. 8% of the participants indicated that preparation for proposal writing did not apply to them at the time of this study.

Furthermore, in trying to find out whether students were adequately prepared researchers talked to some participants. This is what they had to say:

- "We were not adequately prepared ...the time is not enough. I feel we need more skills." - FSI
- "Somehow yes the time was not so great, the period that we meet our lecturers is very short so there is much of

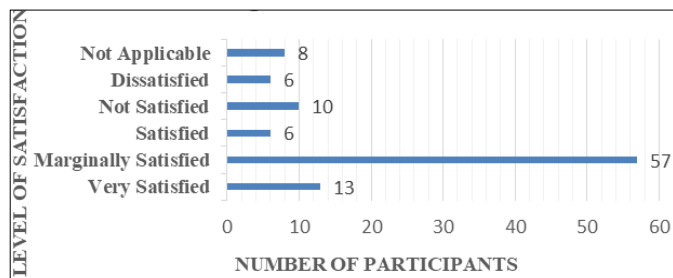


*rushing and running through areas the student is supposed to prepare for proposal.*" - FS2

- *"I think the time was not very enough we were not fully equipped with research skills."* - FS3
- *"I think we did not adequately prepare ourselves. I think we had all the time to do that. I personally think I was prepared adequately."* - FS4
- *"I think we were efficiently prepared."* - FS5

#### 4.1.2 Participants' Level of Satisfaction Regarding the Research Course Module

Participants in this research study were also asked about their perception on how adequate they thought the research course module was for it to prepare them for proposal and dissertation writing. Their responses are as shown in the diagram below:



Source: Field Data, 2018

Fig 3: Showing Participants' Level of Satisfaction as Regards to Research Course Module

From the above figure, the majority of participants, 57% indicated that they were marginally satisfied with the research module being used to prepare them for proposal and dissertation writing. In addition, 13% of participants indicated that they were very satisfied with the module. However, 10% of participants indicated that they were not satisfied with the research module. 6% apiece of participants indicated that were satisfied and dissatisfied respectively with the course module for research. 8% of participants indicated that this particular question did not apply to them.

Moreover, researchers also tried to find out whether the research module met students' expectations regarding its adequacy and this is what some selected participants had to say:

- *"I think it was not very adequate because quite a number of things what would have helped us to go about the writing of the proposal were not sufficiently discussed or described."* - FS3
- *"On the module, at least it has to be simplified a bit."* - TS3
- *"Module had information but not enough time to go through."* - TS6
- *"It was not adequate in the sense that a lot of content was backward, not Zambian or rather not UNZA."* - TS1
- *"I think module covered everything and the residential was sufficient."* - TS2
- *"The module was adequate and steps put in the module were what assisted me to write proposal."* - FS9

#### 4.1.3. Major Challenges faced by Participants while

#### Writing Proposal

In this study, participants were asked to indicate what challenges they faced while writing research proposal. Among the variables which were used to measure their perceptions were: time, skills, course materials, delivery of course material and the nature of research work. Their responses are as shown in the diagram below:

Table 1: Showing Challenges which participants faced in the process of writing Proposal

Challenges Faced by Participants	Frequency	Percent
Lack of time	64	64
Lack of Skills	13	13
Poor Course Materials	1	1
Poor Delivery of Course Material	3	3
Nature of Research (Just being difficult)	2	2
All of the Above	9	9
Not Applicable	8	8
Total	100	100

Source: Field Data, 2018

From the table above, the majority of participants show that 64% of participants indicated that they had a challenge of time. 13% of participants indicated that they lacked skills in research proposal writing. 9% of participants stated that they faced all the challenges (lack of time; lack of skills; poor course materials; poor delivery of course material; and nature of research as being just difficult). 2% of participants indicated that the major challenge they were facing is nature of research work as being difficult. 1% of participants indicated that the challenge they faced is poor course materials for the proposal writing. However, 8% of participants indicated that this question did not apply to them.

Likewise, researchers also tried to find out which other variables posed as challenges to the participants in writing research proposals: What they said was captured in form of verbatim and this is what was said:

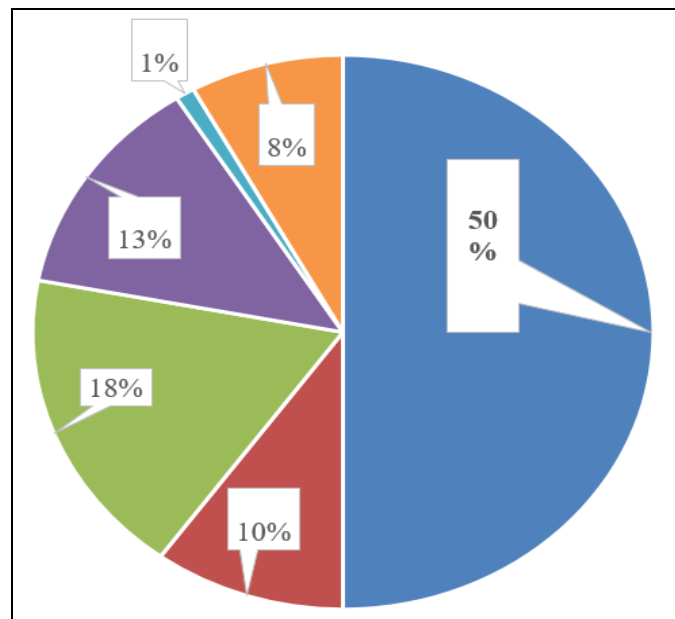
- *"Some terminologies were not clear they needed detailed information for us to apply them effectively."* - TS3
- *"For me the biggest challenge is the frequency of meeting with the supervisor but when we met them they gave us direction but it was after a battle to make an appointment."* - FS12
- *"Getting in touch with my supervisor was a challenge."* - FS5
- *"Challenge was on the feedback from the supervisor, many times I had a challenge in getting in touch with him and when I did, instead of accepting the soft copy, I was made to print the hard copy and even travel from I come from (southern province) to here was a bit expensive."* - FS7
- *"The challenge I had was time, time was not adequate because these documents are read by many people maybe so we need to have enough time so that we scrutinize the work and then write what is good."* - TS8
- *"Time is not enough, we had a lot of activities to do alongside writing proposal as you might be aware we are working. At work it's demanding, school work also is demanding so we had these challenges. Otherwise if the work load is reduced the students would do better in*

future.” - TS9

- “The major one is that issue of accesses, in certain areas of Zambia there is no internet so when you are away from Lusaka you cannot have access to internet.” - TS4

**4.1.4 Specific Component of the Research proposal which Participants had Problems with**

This study also tried to find out from participants which specific components of research proposal writing they had difficulties with. The components which were taken into consideration are: *Chapter one* comprising research background; research problem statement; purpose of study; research objectives; research questions; research hypothesis; research variables; significance of the study; conceptual framework; and operational definitions/acronyms, etc.; *Chapter two* comprising literature review; and *Chapter three* comprising: research methodology; research design; scope of study; target population and sampling techniques; instruments and procedure of/for data collection; data analysis techniques, etc. The participants’ responses are as shown below:



Source: Field Data, 2018

Fig 4: Showing Specific Components Where Participants Had Difficulties in Proposal Writing

From figure 4 above, the majority of participants, 50% indicated that they had difficulties with chapter one of research proposal writing. In addition, 18% of participants indicated that they had difficulties with chapter three of proposal writing. 10% of participants mentioned that they had

difficulties with chapter two of the proposal writing. However, 13% of the total participants indicated that they had difficulties in all the areas of research proposal writing. Besides, 1% of the total participants indicated that did not have difficulties with research proposal writing. 8% indicated that this particular question did not apply to them.

Additionally, the study also tried to hear from the horses’ mouths which specific areas of research proposal writing they had difficulties with and this is what they had to say:

- “I didn’t find any much difficulty in most of the components.” - FS9
- “Maybe on writing the objectives.” - FS5
- “I think one of the components was statement of the problem and under methodology the research design.” - FS8
- “On the agreement on the conceptual framework and theoretical framework. Some literature said you can use either of them while others said you needed both so we needed to have a clarification on that one.” - FS3
- “Maybe on literature review and statement of the problem, to clarify that and make it concise and clear.” - FS2
- “Literature review, as we are outside there it is difficult to get on to where the books are found and also the network because mostly we would depend on the network but in some of these areas that are rural no network enough to do the proposal literature review.” - FS10
- “The challenge of coming up with literature review, because of inadequate books I depended on internet and the internet sometimes you could not get what you want more especially that am coming from a rural place where I depend much on the use of a dongle. When you are out of air time, then it becomes a problem.” - TS5

**4.1.5 Perceived assumption that Postgraduate Distance Students had Adequate Research Skills**

A critical analysis from 16 scholarly works was conducted on the assumption distance students pursuing masters degree possessed sufficient skills in research methodology. The regression analysis revealed the following:

- **Ho:** Postgraduate distance students pursuing Masters Degree do not possess adequate research methodology skills
- **Hi:** Postgraduate distance students pursuing Masters Degree do possess adequate research methodology skills

Table 2

Model	R	R Squared	Adjusted R Squared	Std. Error of the estimate	Change Statistics					Durbin-Watson
					R Squared Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F change	
	0.893	0.798	0.775	153.924	0.798	34.275	3	26	0.000	1.792

Table 3

Model	Un-standardized coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF

Constant	-1811.534	487.346	0.994	-3.717	0.001	0.805	1.243
Inadequate coverage	130.379	12.882	-0.386	10.121	0.000	0.798	1.253
Perceived Perception	-246.382	62.915	-0.048	-3.916	0.001	0.988	1.012
Research module type	-2.774	5.147		-0.539	0.595		

**Taking  $\alpha = 0.05$** 

- Inadequate time is a significant factor in determining the postgraduate distance student's challenges in writing research proposal (i.e.  $P_v < \alpha$ ;  $0.000 < 0.05$ )
- Perceived perceptions that Postgraduate distance student have adequate research methodology skills is a significant factor in determining student's challenges in writing research proposal (i.e.  $P_v < \alpha$ ;  $0.001 < 0.05$ )
- Research module type given to students is not a significant factor in determining postgraduate distance student's challenges in writing research proposal (i.e.  $P_v > \alpha$ ;  $0.595 > 0.05$ )

Notably, all the factors that were significant in the regression model simultaneously contributed to the postgraduate distance student's challenges they faced in research proposal writing. This is computed as shown below:

- Ho: All coefficients are equal to zero
- Hi: Not all coefficients are equal to zero

Critical Value

$$F_{0.05}(3; 26) = 2.98$$

Test Statistic

$$F_{cal} = 34.275$$

We reject Ho: since  $F_{cal} = 34.275 > F_{0.05}(3; 26) = 2.98$

What this means is that both perceived perceptions of postgraduate distance students possessing adequate research skills and inadequate time simultaneously have a significant effect on the challenges distance students faced in proposal writing.

**5. Discussion of Research Findings**

This discussion was guided by study's objectives relating challenges students face in relation to research proposal writing. This research study has established that there are indeed challenges which affect students in writing research proposals.

**5.1 Major Challenges faced by Participants while Writing Research Proposals**

When participants were asked whether they had challenges while writing research proposals relating to time, research writing skills, research course materials, delivery of research course material and the nature of research work, they did indicate that they had such challenges. The majority of participants, 64% indicated that they had a challenge of time. 13% of participants indicated that they lacked research writing skills. 9% of participants stated that they faced all the challenges (lack of time; lack of skills; poor course materials; poor delivery of course material; and nature of research as being just difficult). 2% of participants indicated that the major challenge they were facing is nature of research work as being difficult. 1% of participants indicated that the challenge they faced is poor course materials for the proposal writing. Thus, in discussing the challenges that face students we will concentrate on two prominent challenges: time factor which

had an aggregated percentage of about 73% (64% plus 9%) and lack of research writing skills which had an aggregate of about 22% (13% plus 9%) of the total participants respectively. The other factors are statistically insignificant to influence the findings of this research study.

**5.1.1 Inadequate Time**

De Vos (2015)<sup>[4]</sup> citing Murray (2007) states that writing of research proposals and later on dissertations is time consuming and thus, students are called upon to manage their time strictly. Thus, it is argued that in as much as international students did not have ample time, distance students too have limited time, an issue which has to be adequately addressed. However, Pardey (2007)<sup>[15]</sup> argues that managing time means taking more control over how you spend your time and making sensible decisions about the way you use it. Additionally, he goes on to add that when thinking about how to manage your time, it is useful to distinguish between things you want to achieve in the short term and those you want to achieve in the longer term. So we usually make a distinction between short-term objectives and longer-term goals.

Nevertheless, proposal writing requires critical thinking. Thinking critically does not mean being negative or argumentative. It means, rather, looking at something objectively, carefully and with an independent and a questioning frame of mind. In line with this, it is clear that academic research proposal writing is not an easy task as well. In this research study, most participants indicated that they lacked adequate time for research proposal writing. For instance, in the individual interviews which this study undertook with some sampled participants, most of the participants indicated that they had time as their challenge: Relating to the above observation, literature related to the research proposal writing seems to suggest in part that some of the challenges associated with the quality of research proposals or dissertations are related to misunderstandings between students and supervisors (De Vos, 2015)<sup>[4]</sup>. The quality of the dissertation in other respects reflects the level of supervision. For example, one scholar pointed out that the challenges students face in writing dissertations are often made more difficult by the fact that supervisors have tacit knowledge of the features and approaches to dissertations that they do not communicate to students (ibid.).<sup>[4]</sup> The aforementioned challenges can cause a strong sense of isolation especially to international and distance students. Likewise, it has been argued that some students have complained of not being able to contact supervisors and waiting long periods of time to get feedback Lumadi (2008)<sup>[10]</sup>. Similarly, according to TS9 (Field data, 2018), the argument of time was also prominent. Accordingly, he observed that: *"Time is not enough, we had a lot of activities to do alongside writing proposal as you might be aware we are working. At work it's demanding, school work also is demanding so we had these challenges. Otherwise if the work load is reduced the students would do better in future."*

Consequently, it can be seen from this research study and

other literature that issues of time are coming out prominently in terms of it being a major challenge. In order to test whether time had an effect on students' adequacy in terms of being prepared for research proposal writing a cross tabulation, the results are as shown in the table below

There were 69 total numbers of participants who indicated that they did not have enough time in research proposal writing. Out of these, we had 56 participants who indicated that they were satisfied with their being prepared (lectures and module availability) for research proposal writing. However, when you compute a percentage, you will discover that it comes to above 80% of participants saying they did not have adequate time when it came to research proposal writing.

### 5.1.2 Research Writing Skills

Research writing skills were one of the variables which this study tried to investigate. However, it has been revealed that only 13% of participants indicated frankly that they lacked research writing skills. Even if we were to add the 9% of participants who stated that they faced all the challenges (lack of time; lack of skills; poor course materials; poor delivery of course material; and nature of research as being just difficult), we still do not get a statistically big enough value that can show that research proposal writing was being affected by lack of research proposal writing skills on the part of the students.

The fact remain, lecturers and/or tutors as well as the research module are there and according to the findings of this study adequate to the standards of the participants in this study. However, what is coming out prominently is that there is no adequate time for the students to learn accordingly. Accordingly, from the data that researchers obtained from the verbatim, participants had a view that that on their part, lacking skills was not a major concern but the time factor did. As a result, scholars do suggest that holding writing clinics within the departments will help students acquire the necessary writing skills essential in dissertation writing. Of course the need for students of diverse backgrounds to write quality proposal dissertations is not a matter of academic debate rather a discharge of a part of the university' responsibilities. The maintenance of quality and excellence by universities in their work is of utmost importance if they are to make a meaningful and effective contribution to the development of society and poor quality research has been cited to do disservice to society (UNESCO, 1991).<sup>[19]</sup>

### 5.1.3 Un-proportional ratios between students and supervisor

As regards to the challenges UNZA-ZOU postgraduate students faced, the outcome of this study seems to agree with the scholarly works done by Brailsford (2010)<sup>[2]</sup> that the major causes of these challenges were pedagogical oriented. First, given the trend of higher education students' enrolments in both undergraduate and postgraduate programs, this observation would not be surprising because the number of students pursuing postgraduate programs has increased tremendously in recent years. The increase in the number of students has essentially led to the increase in the number of students a supervisor is given to handle. In other words, the increasing number of students seemed to be un-proportional to

the number of supervisors available in the institutions. With such a great number of students, it would be difficult for the supervisors to pay attention to all students and read their works critically. As a result, the students' research reports become substandard as it has been revealed in this study. Ho (2012)<sup>[6]</sup> further adds that the challenges could also be attributed to the candidates' poor backgrounds in research report writing skills, which is also attributable to shortfalls in the contents and teaching of research methods courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. As it has been revealed by the findings of this study, students seemed to have problems in writing their proposals. This is equally supported by findings of the study done by Manchishi, Ndhlovu, and Mwanza, (2015).<sup>[11]</sup> It therefore follows that if the research methods courses were effectively taught, it was likely that some of the observed challenges would have been minimized or done away with completely.

### 5.1.4 Perceived Perception about Postgraduate Student's ability in research skills and Delivery of Research module

The assumption that postgraduate distance students had adequate knowledge in research methodology peddled by selected previous studies has been refuted in this study. For example, James & Slater (2013)<sup>[7]</sup> attest that research proposal writing requires students to undertake many tasks that call for a range of different skills at different times throughout the process. They further acknowledged that students may not have developed all necessary skills sets in their undergraduate studies such as research design, time management, interpreting of data. It can therefore be argued that research module delivery during residential should be done with the intensity it deserves in order to help postgraduate distance students understand or revise research methodology skills which are key in proposal writing. In an event where the research module had not been adequately covered, the supervisor can go a mile further by implementing the following measures:

- Being available to support the students at every stage, from formulation of the research topic /or proposal, through to establishing methodologies and discussing results, to presentation and possible publication of dissertations and research.
- Assist with selection and planning of suitable and manageable research topics.
- Being familiar with the field of research to provide guidance and/or have a willingness to gain familiarity before agreeing to act as supervisor.
- Being accessible to the student for consultation and discussion of academic progress and research
- Respond in a timely and through manner to written work submitted by the student, with constructive suggestions for improvement and continuation

The supervisor should also be aware that apart from student and supervisor-related challenges advanced by Mouton (2001); Shumba (2004), Nyawaramda (2005) and Pearce (2005) as cited in Mapolisa and Mafa (2013)<sup>[12]</sup> agree that students' capacities to conduct research are affected by institutional-related challenges such as: lack of exposure of tutors to research skills; lack of internet services; lack of



exposure to computers and lack of adequate research materials.

While the student makes an effort to fulfil his or her roles, it is equally imperative for the supervisor to develop a caring and supportive academic relationship with the student by being cognisant of the interaction between personal and the academic, Personal issues should not affect the work of the student, being supportive and sympathetic listener but maintain an appropriate detachment, being flexible in your requirements of student in times of personal stress, considering what supervisor's limits are and what they think they can do and should do; and If there is a serious problem that require an expert, know where to transfer the student. All the above stipulated roles should clearly be documented in the memorandum of understanding between the supervisor and student within the university policy framework.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The conclusion and recommendations were drawn from the research findings guided by research questions and hypothesis. First conclusion is made and thereafter recommendations unearthed.

### 6.1 Conclusion

The study established that postgraduate distance students studying at the University of Zambia (Institute of Distance Education) in collaboration with the Zimbabwe Open University faced a number of challenges in their proposal and thesis writing. The significant identified barriers to postgraduate distance students' quality research proposal writing skills were: 1. An assumption that student at postgraduate level possess adequate proposal writing skills yet in actual fact not (Type I Error). 2. Inadequate of time as research proposal writing is combined with other modules. 3. Lack of research proposal writing skills by the postgraduate distance students [3]. 4. Students' poor attitude towards research proposal writing. 5. Erratic feedback from some of the supervisors. 6. Nature of research as being difficulty. 7. Lack of research memorandum of understanding between supervisor and student

However in as much as students are faced by a lot of challenges in their proposal writing assignment, inadequate of time emerged as one of the major challenges which they face. This is because time is of essence in everything that man does in life. Indeed, many people have argued that there is no time there will be on anyone's disposal. Thus, time has to be created. People; however have asked how this can be done. In principle, it's very easy: all you have to do is to analyze how you have spent your time in the past, then think ahead and plan what you want to do in the future (Pardey, 2007) [15]. Nevertheless, it is argued further that then time falls into line; this precious resource becomes your friend and you can do with it what you will. It is true that plans seldom survive reality completely intact: they are invariably made with insufficient knowledge for them to be carried through without a hitch just like universities do with students. However, reality has it that time does change due to changing circumstances. Notably, there were other challenges that were revealed from the study such as poor course materials and poor delivery of course materials. Nevertheless, these were statistically

insignificant to influence the outcome of the study.

## 6.2 Recommendations

The following recommendations emerged from the study:

### 6.2.1 University of Zambia through the Institute of Distance education in collaboration with course coordinators should allocate more time to the research module

Generally, participants called for more time to be allocated to the research module. In addition, they advocated for adequate time to be given between presentation of proposals after agreeing with supervisors and data collection. Moreover, they stated that the module should be broken down by semester so that various components are thoroughly addressed. In so doing, the participants recommended that research module should start as early as last semester of first year. On this particular submission, it can be emphasized that according to TS5 (2018), "*They should give enough time and even our residential should be increased so that we have enough contact time with our supervisors.*"

### 6.2.2 Supervisors should have frequent engagements with students

In order to give students a lot guide in terms of research proposal writing, it was recommended that supervisors should frequently engage with students they supervise and give them quick feedback and their work. This in turn would help in minimizing on the costs they incurred for those supervisors who needed physical contact with their students. Some participants also complained that some supervisors are not available when called upon by their students.

### 6.2.3 The Institute of Distance education should benchmark and adopt the model by Zimbabwe Open University by Introducing Weekend Sessions for Students who need help

This should be in addition to the already existing official allocated residential sessions. A deliberate mobile team of lecturers and tutors should be constituted by UNZA-ZOU joint implementation team to be conducting open sessions on proposal and dissertation writing in all provincial centres where the Institute of Distance Education have centres. Perhaps this would be an expensive venture, the resident lectures in provincial centres should collaborate with UNZA-ZOU trained lecturers and tutors through Astria E-learning platform to conduct such sessions.

### 6.2.4 The Institute of Distance education should establish and Encourage research Memorandum of understanding Plan that would regulate responsibilities and duties of supervisors and students

UNZA-ZOU should introduce research memorandum of understanding plans between supervisor and student. Such a legal document guide research activities including research proposal, supervisors, student's roles and university/directorate/departmental responsibilities.

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