Unisa
College of Economic and Management Sciences
Study guide
Research Proposal for Master’s and Doctoral Studies
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i. A word of welcome

Dear Student

A warm welcome to you! The research proposal module is an important component of your studies towards a master’s or doctoral degree. You may find that writing your research proposal poses an intellectual, physical and emotional challenge. However, remember that a well-written, scientifically researched proposal provides a strong foundation for the research you will conduct for your dissertation or thesis. If you think of the research proposal as the basic framework, or blueprint, of your research, you will realise how important it is to spend time drafting it properly.

The College of Economic and Management Sciences (CEMS) offers master’s and doctoral degrees in several disciplines, with more than 50 research focus areas. Your research proposal needs to be positioned within a particular research focus area, and must convince an academic panel of both your ability to conduct the research using scientific research methods and the potential of your study to make an academic contribution.

ii. Master’s and doctoral degrees in context

All students enrolled for a master’s or doctoral degree at Unisa need to complete the research proposal module. Each department or discipline has its own master’s and doctoral (M&D) academic and administrative coordinators, who will assist you in your specific field. You will find their contact details in Tutorial Letter 101. A list of the M&D coordinators is also available on the myUnisa site under Additional Resources.

Unisa requires all master’s and doctoral students as well as their supervisors to adhere to the “research ethics policy and guidelines”, as well as all other Unisa policies pertaining to responsible ethical practice and behaviour in respect of copyright infringement, plagiarism, intellectual property, research methods and
procedures, social and environmental interaction and representational concerns (Unisa, 2013a:3). In terms of the Unisa research ethics policy, you must have obtained ethics clearance before you may proceed with your research. You must declare all ethical concerns relating to and seek clearance for the entire research process, from proposal to final dissertation or thesis (Unisa, 2013a:3).

As a student you take primary responsibility for all aspects and phases of your research, from application to graduation. Your myLife e-mail and myUnisa account are the primary channels of communication between Unisa and master’s and doctoral students (Unisa, 2013c:11). Your student number and myUnisa password also give you access to the Unisa library’s e-resources, which will enable you to search for literature on your topic, download full-text material and make use of the library’s services. You must claim your UNISA login and this will also activate your myLife e-mail account.

In compiling your research proposal you will be guided by a research supervisor within the research focus area to which you have been admitted. You will have the opportunity to rework drafts of your proposal based on feedback from the supervisor. When your supervisor is satisfied with the research proposal or by the due date for submission your proposal will be evaluated in accordance with college and academic department guidelines. Once the research proposal has been formally approved by the department as well as the College Higher Degrees Committee, 36 credits are awarded and the proposal is archived (Unisa, 2013a:3). You will then receive a formal letter from Unisa notifying you of the outcome. Only then will you be allowed to register for the dissertation phase, in the case of a master’s degree, and the thesis phase, in the case of a doctoral degree (Unisa, 2013a:3).

- **Take note**
  - It is important to get in touch with the personal librarian assigned to your academic department as early in your studies as possible. The personal librarians will assist you in getting acquainted with the library and its services and show you how to search for literature on your topic, as well as provide guidelines on how to use the referencing software.
o Ethics plays an important role in your research. Information regarding ethical conduct and ethics clearance is available in the policy for master's and doctoral degrees.

o Get yourself acquainted with the research policy of Unisa as soon as possible.

o The procedures for master’s and doctoral degrees will provide you with more information regarding your responsibilities and what you may expect from a research supervisor.

Although some departments or disciplines may have specific requirements for a research proposal, there are basic elements that must appear in any academic research proposal. The following elements are largely universal, and will be discussed in this guide:

1. Title
2. Research problem
3. Research purpose and objectives
4. Preliminary literature review (background and motivation)
5. Research design and research method
   (sampling, research instruments, data capturing, data analysis)
6. Limitations and recommendations
7. Ethical requirements
8. Timeline and budget
9. Chapter outline
10. Technical requirements
11. References
   (Babbie, 2013:118; Horn, 2012:53)

Postgraduate studies are guided not only by institutional policies, but also by the South African higher education system.
iii. The South African Higher Education Qualification Sub-Framework (HEQSF)

The HEQSF establishes common parameters and criteria for qualifications design and facilitates the comparability of qualifications across the tertiary education system (HEQSF, 2013:6).

The HEQSF sets out the range of qualification types in higher education that may be awarded to mark the achievement of learning outcomes that have been appropriately assessed. The qualification type descriptors include specifications in terms of total minimum credits required, naming conventions related to designators, qualifiers and abbreviations, the purpose and characteristics of a qualification type, minimum admission requirements, and the rules of progression to other qualification types (HEQSF, 2013:810).

**Take note**
- The HEQSF (2013) provides extended information on the establishment of a single qualifications framework for higher education as well as the different master’s and doctoral degrees that you may enrol for, and the purpose and characteristics of each one.

1. **Definition of a research proposal**

Your research proposal is the document that you need to prepare for submission to the Higher Degree Committee of the department through which you are studying. It is the first phase in writing a dissertation or thesis. Once your research proposal is accepted by the relevant department’s Higher Degrees Committee, you will be allowed to register for your master’s dissertation or doctoral thesis.

A research proposal is a detailed description of the research you intend conducting. “It describes the problem (or the area of unknown knowledge) you aim to address, why it is important, what others have done in this area, and how you plan to do
something unique” (Wentz, 2014:3). Wentz (2014:3) goes on to say that a research proposal “describes your plan for creating new knowledge”.

- **Take note**
  - Tutorial Letter 101 explains the assessment criteria for the research proposal.

### 1.1 The purpose of a research proposal

Hofstee (2006:59) describes the research proposal as “a vital document in your dissertation process.” In it you set out the problem that you are going to investigate and how you plan to investigate it (Welman, Kruger, & Mitchell, 2012:279:). You also state the importance of the research topic, and discusses your intended research methods and why these offer the best way to do the research (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2007:3).

New knowledge is discovered through the process of research, and the research proposal is the first step in the research process. Theory (such as the theory of learning, motivation or development) helps you to organise the new information. “Research is actively based on the work of others” (Van Zyl, 2014:3), but it not simply a duplication of research already done. Existing research offers a foundation for your research and suggests possibilities as to how your research might be conducted.

Van Zyl (2014:3) identifies the following characteristics of high-quality research:

- It is based on other relevant research;
- It can be repeated;
- It can be generalised to other settings;
- It is based on some logical rationale and tied to theory;
- It is achievable;
- It brings forth possibilities for further research; and
- It should be undertaken for the advancement of society.
When you complete your research proposal, it may feel as if you have already completed half the research (Wentz, 2014:xiii). Keep in mind that a solid proposal will keep you on the right track. If the proposal is not of a high standard, you will have to get all the elements that should have been correct in the proposal in place later, and you will not have the clear direction offered by a good proposal (Hofstee, 2006:59; Salkind, 2014:335).

1.2 Choosing a topic

The first concrete step in writing a research proposal is finding a research topic. Hofstee (2006:14) describes a topic as “the specific subject of your dissertation”. The topic will assist you in identifying a problem. Furthermore, it will guide your search for relevant information on this subject. This information will form part of your preliminary literature review. It will provide background information and will also give an indication of the contribution that your study will make to the specific field of study (Hofstee, 2006:14-15).

It is important to give some independent and systematic thought to your research topic. There are many ways in which research ideas can be developed, and personal experience, coursework, your job or your interests might play a role (Welman et al., 2012:13:). Events that take place as well as discussions with colleagues and topics explored during conferences or seminars that you attend might give you some ideas to investigate further. This you do by reading scientific literature. It may be a good idea to read some master’s dissertations or doctoral theses as well as research articles in scientific journals (Roberts, 2004). The library has a number of databases that may be used for this purpose.

The easiest way to find resources in the library is to make use of the subject guide for your subject. Select your subject from the A–Z list. The subject guides contain tabs that divide the resources available into types of material. To access the list of resources on theses and dissertations, click on the Theses and Dissertations tab to see the list of links to resources that you can use to find master’s dissertations or doctoral theses to read. The National ETD Portal database contains full-text theses
and dissertations, while the Nexus current and completed research projects database contains only bibliographic details.

A good way to select a topic might be to make a list of possible topics and evaluate them based on your initial expression of interest essay relating to a research focus area. Hofstee (2006:15–17) developed a topic scoring sheet with specific criteria according to which the topic can be evaluated. The criteria include:

- problem/thesis statement potential;
- focused;
- ease of data gathering;
- secondary literature;
- mastery of methods;
- supervisor support;
- time of completion;
- your strengths; and
- your interests.

**Take note**

- For more information about these criteria as well as the topic score sheet, read Hofstee (2006:15–17).

After you have decided on a topic, you need to start thinking about a specific problem within this topic or subject that you want to investigate. If there is no problem, it might be difficult to find anything to investigate or draw conclusions about (Hofstee, 2006:13).

2. **Structure of a research proposal**

The initial formulation of your research topic helps you to demarcate your field of interest. Drawing up a defensible research proposal requires you to familiarise yourself with the specific research field. It will help if you understand the current thinking of researchers in your field of study. On the basis of the reading you have done to determine a research topic, you might already have identified a gap in the
available body of knowledge that offers you a research opportunity. Your research proposal is then your “thinking document” and a guideline for the rest of your work (Horn, 2009:53).

As we said earlier, there is no single fixed structure for a research proposal, and different academic departments or subject disciplines might require different or more sections. However, there are certain fundamental components that must appear in any research proposal, and these will be discussed below in more detail.

2.1 Title

Once you have a reasonable idea of the topic that you want to investigate, you can formulate a provisional title. The title should give a good indication of what you consider to be the critical elements of your research (Wentz, 2014:166–167). Although Horn (2009:53) suggests that the title should be “short and snappy”, Wentz (2014:166) cautions that titles that are too short may not convey enough information. However, if the title is too long, it may be cumbersome. You need to draft a clear, informative title that captures the essence of your research. Usually the title that you give to your proposal is a working title (Horn, 2009:53; Levin, 2011:45). A useful strategy is to finalise the title after you have written your research proposal, and before you start your research, as at that stage you may find it necessary to make some changes to the title. Levin (2011:45–46) suggests that if you have to submit your title at an early stage, you should “choose one that is not too restrictive, so it can accommodate changes in direction or emphasis that you may later find necessary”.

According to the procedures for master’s and doctoral degrees (Unisa, 2013c:8), you are required to submit a working title with your admission application. The working title remains on the student system until the research proposal has been approved.

❖ Take note

- Consult the procedures for master’s and doctoral degrees document for more information (Unisa, 2013c).
2.2 Formulating the research problem

We have found that most students struggle to clearly define the problem that they plan to investigate. Defining or formulating the problem is an important part of your proposed research, and you should spend sufficient time on this. Formulating the research problem helps you to obtain clarity on the exact scope of your research. It will also help you to focus on a particular problem which is small enough to investigate. The research problem is formulated as a result of a study (including a literature study) that reveals gaps in the existing knowledge about a specific area (Welman et al., 2012:13:).

The research problem “tells the story behind the variables or concepts to be studied and provides background for the purpose statement and research question” (Roberts, 2004:120). The research problem becomes clear when you ask: “What problem influenced the need to undertake this study?” (Babbie & Mouton, 2011:103).

The problem statement provides the background for the purpose statement, concepts to be studied and the research question. You need to cite literature sources to give an indication of where this study will fit into existing research and the actual problem to be investigated. You can cite your sources manually according to the college referencing style, or you can do this electronically by making use of a reference management software program. There are many software packages available, but the library supports Mendeley and RefWorks. Please click on the Referencing tab on your subject guide for links to these products, the official referencing style documents from the college as well as training material.

The problem statement concludes with the contribution that your intended study will make to a specific field (Roberts, 2004:120–121).

❖ Take note
  
  o It is important to be open to suggestions by supervisors and other experts who might be able to help you to formulate the research
problem in such a way that it might be more specific and solvable (Van Zyl, 2014:41).

- Delineations limit the work you need to do and cover your back very effectively (Hofstee, 2006:28). They clearly communicate the parameters of your study by stipulating what you are not responsible for and the reason for that (Hofstee, 2006:87).

2.3 Research purpose/objectives, questions, rationale, hypotheses and propositions

2.3.1 Research purpose or objective

“A research objective is a declarative statement describing an outcome-based goal investigating facts, theories, or methods. The outcome is a better understanding into a gap identified in the literature review” (Wentz, 2014:131). The purpose statement of your research proposal is usually forthright, simple and brief (Locke et al., 2007:9). The purpose states the intention of your study, in other words, “what exactly you are going to find out” (Roberts, 2004:124–125). We could say that the purpose statement reflects the essence or focus of your study. Objectives or aims are also used to expand the purpose statement.

One of the difficulties when writing a research objective is to identify what is research and what is a task that does not advance knowledge or understanding. You need to solve a problem or accumulate new insight (Wentz, 2014:131).

According to Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (2006:84) the purpose of the research is formulated in three stages:

1. A general statement of what the research aims to discover;
2. The rationale of the study and the importance of the findings; and
3. The specific questions or hypotheses to be investigated in the research.

Bear in mind that the proposed research design informs the setting of a hypothesis or of a proposition.
2.3.2 Research question

The question of what you are going to research is crucial. In order to decide what the research question will be, you have to make some decisions (Race, 2010). A research question is a specific way of stating the research problem in the form of a question (Horn, 2009:55; Vogt, 2005:277). It is a specific construction of “interest and intent” (Van Zyl, 2014:44). “The research question is an interrogative statement” (Wentz, 2014:132–133). The questions you pose can be descriptive, identify relationships, and suggest or prove the relationship between cause and effect. The primary research question is the purpose of the study, rephrased as a question. You may want to research more than one question. Your decision about the number of research questions may be influenced by the subject of the study and whether you will be applying a quantitative or qualitative methodology (Race, 2010).

2.3.3 Research rationale and justification

In the research rationale you supply the reasons why you are going to conduct this particular study. The rationale is developed “alongside a review of some central ideas in the relevant literature. The purpose is to indicate that the proposed study is part of a broader context of academic enquiry” (Terre Blanche et al., 2006:84). The research justification sets out the rationale for the research. It not only explains the reason for the research, but also accounts for the research methods as well as the design of the research (Given, 2008).

2.3.4 Hypothesis and propositions

Paradigms are general frameworks or viewpoints. Whereas a paradigm is the way we look at things, theory “aims at explaining what we see” (Babbie, 2013:69). Concepts are the building blocks of a theory, and can be defined as “abstract elements representing classes of phenomena within the field of study”. Propositions are the “relationships among concepts” (Babbie, 2013:70). Propositional knowledge may be used in the literature on qualitative inquiry in a way that “connotes something
more like abstract formal language” (Miller & Brewer, 2003). Cooper and Schindler (2005:62) define a proposition as a statement about observable phenomena (concepts) that may be judged as true or false. When a proposition is formulated for empirical testing, it is called a hypothesis.

A hypothesis is an important milestone in a quantitative study. It is a tentative statement about relationships between two or more variables. The hypothesis will guide the study and predict the relationship between the variables. It has not yet been proved, and so the hypothesis will be either rejected or accepted. The literature review originates the hypothesis in the theoretical proposition already established (Locke et al., 2007:11; Van Zyl, 2014:7; Kasim & Kalaian, 2008). The hypothesis should be testable and adequate for its purpose, and so the techniques required should be available. Researchers generally make use of two kinds of hypotheses. A null hypothesis indicates that there will be no relationship between variables – in other words, it implies a zero correlation between variables. When the null hypothesis is rejected, the alternative hypothesis is accepted. The alternative hypothesis (also termed the research hypothesis) is the opposite of the null hypothesis (Van Zyl, 2014:30–31, 95; Cooper & Schindler, 2005:45). The research hypothesis should be short and to the point. Furthermore it should be testable, and should reflect the literature or theory that forms the foundation of the research (Van Zyl, 2014:32).

2.4 Preliminary literature review

A literature review can be defined as a “systematic synthesis of previous work around a particular topic” (Card, 2010). However, a literature review is not a chronological summary of what other researchers have found. Instead, it is a synthesised account of the body of knowledge on the proposed topic.

When you start with your research project, remember to keep a record of all the information you find that may be applicable to your research topic. The referencing software packages we referred to earlier can help you with this, and also with
organising the material. Online training is available. If you need additional training, the CEMS personal librarians will be able to assist you.

2.4.1 Background information

In order to refine a suitable research topic in a particular field, you need to familiarise yourself with the existing knowledge in that field. Initially, this should involve at least two procedures: general reading in your field of interest, and performing a specific literature search for relevant references.

Use your subject guide to find suitable literature on your topic. It is important to make use of SA ePublications (access these by clicking on the Articles tab) for full-text South African journal articles. This is just one of many resources available under your subject guide.

Do not confine your reading to a clearly demarcated topic at this early stage, but instead read to build up an adequate background. The purpose of a literature review in the proposal is to ensure that you become acquainted with an adequate sample of earlier work on which you can base your own research work and which you can use to create something new. It will also give the readers of your proposal the knowledge they need to understand it. The literature review in your proposal is not an explanation of everything you know about the subject, but rather a synthesis of the material relevant to your proposed research (Wentz, 2014:81).

❖ Take note

- Locke et al. (2007:65) suggest that you talk to your supervisor and research colleagues or fellow students who are knowledgeable about the area of your research proposal before you start with your literature search.
- Writing the literature review is different from exploring the literature. Exploring the literature involves discovering what sources (books and articles) are available that you might use. Writing the preliminary literature review is more like writing an essay to give an overview of literature that is appropriate to your research (Levin, 2011:28).
o For more information on notetaking during the exploring phase of the literature review, consult Rilley *et al.* (2000:69–71).

### 2.4.2 Some guidelines on what to look for in the literature

You could think of exploring the literature as skimming through it. Levin (2011:29–30) gives a few guidelines on what you need to look for. Be on the alert for:

- Authors with different opinions;
- Theories and hypotheses;
- Concepts and definitions;
- Generalisations;
- Questions that are asked;
- Connections;
- Inconsistencies;
- Methods used for data gathering and data analysis;
- Conclusions that authors make; and
- Recent developments.

The literature review as part of the research proposal focuses on the main directions that previous researchers took in this area as well as the methodologies they used. Conceptual and theoretical formulation should get more attention. Only discuss those studies that provide a foundation for your proposed investigation. The relevance and contribution of these studies to the proposed research should be clear. An organised conceptual framework “represents the most important single opportunity for the application of original thought” (*Locke et al.*, 2007:18). This may lead to new ways of interpreting relationships.

### 2.4.3 Purpose of the literature review

The literature study serves several purposes. It shows:

- that you are aware of what is going on in the field;
- that there is a theory base for the work you are proposing to do;
• how your work fits in with what has already been done (the context for your work);
• that your work has significance (to ensure that you are not merely duplicating work that has already been done); and
• that your work will lead to new knowledge (Hofstee, 2006:91).

2.4.4 Structure of the literature review

When you start writing down the information you have found, group the ideas in a logical way, with a clear indication of the relationship between the concepts. Pay attention to the sequence in which you present your ideas: it is best to state a general idea that summarises a topic before presenting individual, more detailed ideas. By doing this, you will show the relationship between the facts and make sure that the correct information is communicated (Minto, 2002:8–9). Minto (2002:5) refers to this as a pyramid structure. Hofstee (2006:94–100) uses the term the “funnel method" to describe more or less the same thing.

2.4.5 Theoretical framework

A theoretical framework is “a guiding principle for research that provides structure or an explanation to a problem” (Wentz, 2014:83). The theoretical framework can be the starting point for an exploratory research process.

In this section of your proposal you need to show that you understand the major theories that support your own research work and can relate your work to them. In the words of Hofstee (2006:92), theory, in academic terms, is “a logical explanation for why something is as it is or does as it does. Theories are not cast in stone – something may come along and disprove them tomorrow – but they are the best explanations we currently have”. There might be several theories (some even conflicting) about why something is the way it is. In order to establish a theory base for your dissertation or thesis, you need to identify the major explanatory theories that pertain to what you are doing and comment on them as they relate to your work.
Theories can involve either deductive or inductive reasoning. Both of these are forms of logical thinking. Theory is used to learn about and explain the world. Wentz (2014:83–84) offers the following explanation: “Theory is either used as the starting point and conclusions about a selected group are identified (deduction), or observations about a group are the starting point and the theory is the conclusion (induction).” A number of researchers make use of both deductive and inductive reasoning. Existing theories are used to draw conclusions (theoretical framework) and to use observations to develop (or affirm) a theory.

Take note

- The library at Unisa will be an important source of information as you compile your preliminary literature review. If you have not yet started to use your subject guide and contacted the personal librarian assigned to your academic department, now would be a good time to do so.
- Wentz (2014:85–94) suggests “concrete steps” to assist with the writing of a literature review for the proposal. You may find these helpful if you feel stuck and do not know where to start.
- It may be a good idea to consult your supervisor regarding your choice of a theoretical framework for the research project.

2.5 Research design and research methodology

The research design is a plan or blueprint for answering the research questions and fulfilling the objectives of the study (Miller & Salkind, 2002a). It can also be described as the “logical structure that guides” the researcher (DeForge, 2010:1253). It focuses on the end-product. “What kind of study is being planned and what kind of results are aimed at? What kind of evidence is required to address the research question adequately? The research methodology focuses on the research process and the kind of tools and procedures to be used” (Babbie & Mouton., 2011:75).

Take note

- Further information regarding the research design and methodology can be found in Principles of methodology: research design in social science (Bellamy, 2012).
Babbie and Mouton (2011:74) uses the following metaphor to explain a research design:

Source: Babbie and Mouton (2011:74)

Different types of research designs are used to answer different research questions and will influence the types of sampling, data collection and data analysis that the researcher will use (Bellamy, 2012). The differences between research design and research methodology are listed in the table below.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research design</th>
<th>Research methodology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The final product is the centre point. What are the results that you hope for?</td>
<td>The main focus is on the research process. What are the tools and procedures that you will use?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The research problem or research question is the starting point.</td>
<td>You start with specific tasks such as the method of data collection or the sampling method.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The focus is on the evidence that is needed to answer the research question.</td>
<td>The focus is on the most objective individual steps needed to carry out the procedure.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Babbie and Mouton (2011:75)

Denicolo and Becker (2012:65) explain that a research design should:
- express the logic that underpins the planned strategy;
- include details of the procedures, which will include the instruments used;
- describe how different parts of the process interrelate;
- define the characteristics of the research population;
- provide information regarding the numbers and types of samples;
- anticipate problems and discuss possible solutions;
- describe and justify data analysis; and
- convey familiarity and confidence in handling the procedures and instruments.

### 2.5.1 Research approach

The research approach can be classified as either qualitative, quantitative or mixed-method (triangulation) (Roberts, 2004:110–114). The difference between the approaches lies in the philosophical or theoretical foundation. In quantitative research the researcher collects predominantly numerical data and uses deductive reasoning. The analysis of the data is mostly statistical (Horn, 2009:6–7). In philosophical terms the quantitative approach is termed logical positivism. The inquiry begins with a specific plan. The researcher is looking for facts; he or she
wants to know a lot about a small number of variables in order to identify differences. The collected data is primarily numerical, and comprises the results of surveys, tests, experiments and so on. The majority of quantitative approaches manipulate variables and control the research setting. Quantitative designs include descriptive research, experimental research, quasi-experimental research, ex-post facto/causal comparative research and correlational research (Roberts, 2004:110; Brewer & Kubn, 2010; Brown, 2010; Muijs, 2011).

The qualitative approach is underpinned by the philosophical orientation termed phenomenology (D. C. Miller & Salkind, 2002b). Phenomenology focuses on people’s experience from their perspective. Qualitative inquiry begins with general and broad questions regarding the research topic, and the researchers are looking for a holistic picture in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena they are studying. There is a lot of fieldwork involved. Observations, in-depth and/or open-ended interviews and written documents are used. The data comprises words that describe or convey people’s knowledge, opinions, perspectives, feelings, activities and interpersonal interactions. Qualitative research looks at the essential character or nature of a phenomenon, and not the quantity. It is also called naturalistic inquiry, as it is conducted in real-world settings; no attempt is made to manipulate the environment. Researchers want to get to the meanings people attach to activities and events in their world, and are open to whatever emerges. Qualitative research refers to several research genres (Rosaline, 2008), including case study research, historical research, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative analysis, action research and hermeneutics (Roberts, 2004:111; Horn, 2009:6–7; Rosaline, 2008; Charmaz, 2004; Clandinin & Caine, 2008; Graham & Al-Krenawi, 2001; Hammersley, 2006; Noffke & Bridget, 2009).

It is possible to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches in one study, even though they are grounded in different paradigms. Numerical data may form part of a qualitative study, and narrative data (open-ended questionnaire responses) may be part of a quantitative study. Qualitative and quantitative approaches in a single study may complement each other by providing results with greater breadth and depth (Roberts, 2004:112–113).
2.5.2 Populations and sampling

In a research study the population is that group (for example of people, objects or events) that the researcher wants to study and intends to base conclusions on. The researcher must clearly define the target population of the study. It is not possible to study all the members of a population, and so a sample of the population is usually taken (Babbie & Mouton, 2011:75; Gott & Duggan, 2003). Salkind (2014:185) describes a population as “a group of potential participants to whom you want to generalise the results of a study. A sample is a subset of that population.” (See also Van Zyl (2014:95).) The sample should therefore be of a suitable size to represent the population and to enable the researcher to make generalised remarks or conclusions that are relevant to the population.

There are several reasons for sampling. Sampling is more economical. It lowers the cost and it also increases the speed of data collection. Furthermore, sampling could also increase the accuracy of the results, since the investigations or interviews may perhaps be conducted in a more thorough way (Cooper & Schindler, 2006:403).

When it is possible to apply results to different populations with the same characteristics in different settings, we say that it is possible to generalise these results. In cases where the sample is not an accurate representation of the population, the results are applicable only to people in the same sample who participated in the original research (Van Zyl, 2014:95).

2.5.2.1 Probability and non-probability sampling

You need to know the difference between two general sampling strategies, namely probability sampling and non-probability sampling.

Probability sampling

In the case of probability sampling strategies, selection of the participants is determined by chance. Non-systematic and random rules determine the sample, and
so the possibility that the sample will “truly represent the population is increased” (Salkind, 2014:186).

**Simple random sampling**

Simple random sampling is the most common type of probability sampling. Each member of the population has an equal and independent opportunity to be part of the sample. By “equal opportunity” we mean that there is no bias that one person will be chosen rather than another, and by “independent opportunity” we mean that the choice of one member of the population does not bias the researcher either for or against the choice of another (Salkind, 2014:186). A table of random numbers can be used to select the sample, or a computer can generate a random sample (Salkind, 2014:187–190).

**Systematic sampling**

Systematic sampling is when “every kth name on the list is chosen. The term ‘kth’ stands for a number between 0 and the size of the sample that you want to select” (Salkind, 2014:190). Salkind (2014:190) explains this practically by means of an example. If you want to select 10 participants from a list of 50 people, you start by dividing the population by the size of the sample (50 divided by 10 is 5). The starting point can be selected in any manner, and from there on every fifth name is selected.

**Stratified sampling**

The researcher divides a population into sub-populations or strata, and then random samples from each of these strata are selected. The number of items is predetermined (Terre Blanche et al., 2006:136-138).

**Cluster sampling**

The researcher divides the population into convenient groups (clusters), and from there any number of participants is randomly selected from these groups. Clusters may be formed on the basis of any common characteristic, for example a geographical area (Salkind, 2014:192).

**Non-probability sampling**
Non-probability sampling is based on the probability that any particular member of the population being chosen is unknown. Non-probability sampling seems to be more absolute and subjective than probability sampling. Personal judgement plays an important role. Therefore, particular members of the population do not have an equal and independent chance of being selected (Salkind, 2014:192). However, non-probability sampling is not so complicated, and might be more economical in terms of time and financial expenditure.

**Convenience sampling**
A convenience sample is chosen on the basis of availability: participants are selected because they are available (Salkind, 2014:192). This may lead to some elements in the population being over-represented and others under-represented.

**Purposive or judgemental sampling**
In terms of this sampling method the researcher selects the participants on the basis of the nature or the aim of the research or the judgement of the researcher (Babbie & Mouton, 2011:166). The researcher is interested in a specific type of subject, and he or she is able to exercise expert judgement.

**Snowball sampling**
Snowball sampling involves asking the participants in a target population to provide information about other members of that population that they might know. This method is used when it is difficult to identify members of a specific target population (Babbie & Mouton, 2011:167).

**Quota sampling**
Participants are selected on the basis of specific characteristics. Therefore quota sampling often starts with a matrix or table reflecting the characteristics of the target population. Once the matrix has been completed, the sample is taken from people who have all the characteristics required (Babbie & Mouton, 2011:167).
Take note

- Consult Salkind (2014:194) for a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of the different types of sampling.
- The guidance of your supervisor or a research expert in deciding on the sampling method that will best fit your research is invaluable.
- You will find a review of sampling techniques in Miller and Salkind (2002c:52–57).

2.5.2.2 Sample size

It is not easy for a researcher to select a sample that “perfectly represents the population” (Salkind, 2014:192). If the sample size is too small, it is not representative of the population, and if it is too large, it might be “overkill” (Salkind, 2014:195).

Take note

- The sampling strategy and type of sampling that is used will influence the sample size.
- More information in this regard can be found in Salkind (2014:195–196).

Your research proposal needs to convince the academic panel that the sampling strategy is appropriate for the planned research and sufficient to meet the research objectives, or answer the research questions. Your rationale for the sampling strategy should be clearly supported, based on the existing body of knowledge on research methodology.

2.5.3 Data-collection and analysis techniques

2.5.3.1 Ethics clearance

In terms of the policy on research ethics, before you start your data collection you must obtain ethics clearance from the appropriate Research Ethics Committee for all research involving human participants, data, animals, or other living or genetically
modified organisms (Unisa, 2013a:3; Unisa, 2013b). Ethics will be discussed further in section 2.7.

2.5.3.2 Methods of data collection and data analysis

There are a number of methods that you can use to collect the data for your research. You can use either primary sources (in this case you are involved in the collection of data) or secondary sources (in this case another researcher has collected the data for another research project). Data collection can be interactive or non-interactive. It can be by means of observation or communication. The choice of data-collection and data-analysis methods will depend on the approach and method you decide on for your research project. Make sure that your data analysis is consistent with the data collection (Franklin, 2012:167–168; Roberts, 2004:142–144).

2.5.3.3 Steps in data collection

According to Salkind (2014:223) the data-collection process consists of four steps:

1. Construct a data collection form to organise the data that will be collected.
2. Identify a coding strategy to represent the data on the data collection form.
3. Collect the actual data.
4. Enter the data on the data collection form.

There are significant distinctions between data gathering (collection) and analysis in quantitative and qualitative research (Franklin, 2012:169).

2.5.3.4 Qualitative data collection and analysis

Qualitative data collection (also referred to as data production) and analysis implies that non-statistical methods are used. It embraces meaning, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols and descriptions. It is not possible to express the meaning by means of numbers (Franklin, 2012:169). Franklin (2012:169–170)
describes three modes of data-gathering and analysis techniques in the qualitative paradigm:

1. Researching human subjects
   This requires face-to-face and/or computer-mediated interviews, surveys, focus groups, diaries or other narrative work where a researcher interacts with a group or individuals in a specific time and place.

2. Research in a field, community or group
   The researcher conducts fieldwork by observing the participants and keeping records of this interaction.

3. Researching records or other social texts
   The researcher accesses historical archives, policy documents or any other documents. These documents may be either hard copies or digital.

2.5.3.5 Quantitative data collection and analysis

Quantitative data collection and analysis focus on the collection of information that is measureable and countable (Franklin, 2012:170). Data is collected in a controlled and replicable manner to test hypotheses. Quantitative research projects often make use of publicly available data sets, such as census results or government statistics.

2.5.3.6 Mixed-method data collection and analysis

Quantitative methods may be combined with qualitative methods for data collection as well as data analysis in a mixed-method approach (triangulation). Franklin (2012:170) identifies the following examples:

1. Survey-based research on human subjects
2. Content analysis
3. (Quasi-) experimental

Although there are not mutually exclusive approaches, some combinations may be more workable than others (Franklin, 2012:171).

2.5.3.7 Reliability and validity
Reliability can be described as “a measure of the consistency or reproducibility of data collected using the same methodology on more than one occasion; across different, but related test items; or by different individuals” (Beins, 2013:130). Salkind (2014:165) explains that the research question as well as the hypothesis may be of a high standard, but if the instruments that you use to measure the behaviour are not correct, there is no chance of success. Synonyms that might be used for “reliability” are consistency, stability and predictability (Salkind, 2014:165).

- **Take note**
  - Consult Salkind (2014:168–172) for information about how to increase and measure reliability, as well as the different types of reliability.

Validity can be defined as “a property of data, concepts, or research findings whereby they are useful in varying degrees for measuring or understanding phenomena” (Beins, 2013:131). Synonyms for “validity” include accuracy, authenticity and genuineness (Salkind, 2014:173). When you talk about validity, you are talking about the results of the test, and not the test itself (Salkind, 2014:173); validity indicates that the tool you are using measures what you want it to measure. Synonyms for “reliability” are consistency, stability and predictability (Salkind, 2014:165). Reliability is a statistical measure of how reproducible the survey instrument’s data are. The context in which the test was done must be taken into consideration when the validity and reliability of any results are discussed.

- **Take note**
  - For information about the different types of validity, consult Salkind (2014:174–177).

Qualitative researchers prefer to use the concept “trustworthiness” instead of validity. Roberts (2004:145) describes trustworthiness as “the credibility factor that helps the reader to trust your data analysis”.

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2.6 Limitations and recommendations

Limitations are not the same as delineations. By delineating your study you define your research and indicate that certain issues are not dealt with in your study. Limitations indicate that your research study is limited and that not everything is done perfectly (Hofstee, 2006:87). There are some limitations in every research project. If you discuss these honestly, the readers can decide what their effect on the study is. Limitations are those areas “over which you have no control” (Roberts, 2004:146–147).

You may include recommendations, which are your suggestions about how the work could be taken further (Hofstee, 2006:159). You can include recommendations in your research proposal, but you would usually include them in your actual dissertation or thesis.

2.7 Ethics requirements

The term “ethics” in research originated from the philosophical study of moral principles. It explains the code of conduct that determines how the research will be done. Professional bodies each draft their own code of ethics. A code of ethics will provide guidance if there is uncertainty. Even if your research does not involve living participants (humans or animals), the well-being of everybody who may be affected by the results of the research must be taken into account. Both natural scientists and social scientists working with people in their research need to take ethics into account (Denicolo & Becker, 2012:70–71).

Below is a list of general ethical guidelines that researchers must adhere to (Babbie & Mouton, 2011:521–525; Van Zyl, 2014:85–89):

- Voluntary participation;
- Protection of participants from harm;
- Anonymity and confidentiality (privacy);
- Subjects must never be deceived; and
- Debriefing (in cases where participants may need this).
An informed consent form must be completed by every human participant in a research project. This form ensures ethical behaviour, and in order to protect participants it should contain at least the following information (Van Zyl, 2014:86–87):

- Objective of the research;
- The identity of the researcher;
- A description of the research;
- An indication of the duration of the participant’s involvement;
- Assurance that the participant may withdraw at any time;
- Potential benefits of the study;
- Assurance of confidentiality;
- An undertaking by the researcher to make the results of the study available to participants; and
- Contact details of researcher in case of questions.

**Take note**

- Consult Terre Blanche et al. (2006:74–75) for an example of a letter of consent.
- For instances where children are participants in a research study, more information can be found in Van Zyl (2014:88–92).
- It is worthwhile to study the policy of Unisa on research ethics before you start with your research proposal (Unisa, 2013b).

According to Unisa’s procedures for master’s and doctoral degrees (2013c:17), ethics clearance must be obtained for all research projects before they can be conducted. Furthermore, an ethics clearance certificate must be included when the thesis or dissertation is submitted (Unisa, 2013c:17). Below is the part of the procedure that is applicable here:

**ETHICS CLEARANCE FOR RESEARCH**

7.1 All research must in terms of the UNISA Research Ethics Policy be considered for ethics clearance before it may commence. All research involving human participants, data, animals, or other living or genetically
modified organisms must have ethics clearance from an appropriate Research Ethics Committee. If the research involves UNISA staff or students, permission to do the research must be obtained from the Senate Higher Degrees Research and Innovation Committee in terms of the *Policy on Conducting Research Involving Unisa Staff, Students or Data.*

7.2 The ethical implications of the proposed research must be considered when the student is developing the research proposal. Ethics clearance may need to be formally obtained during this phase, but must be obtained before the candidate commences data-gathering. The candidate will be guided by the College in this regard, in accordance with the procedures and processes set out by the relevant College Research Ethics Committee. No ethics clearance will be granted *ex post facto.*

7.3 Candidates must be able to include an appropriately issued ethics clearance certificate (confirming approval or exemption) when submitting a thesis or dissertation for examination purposes. (Unisa, 2013c:17)

### 2.8 Timeline and budget

#### 2.8.1 Timeline

It is important to plan and manage the phases of the dissertation. The research proposal is a good time to start with this planning process. At this stage the timeline can be set out in broad terms (Horn, 2009:61). This shows that you know how to divide the research project into specific tasks and how long you estimate each task will take. Be as realistic as possible, and keep in mind that unexpected events may be part of your research journey (Wentz, 2014:171).

According to Unisa’s procedures for master’s and doctoral degrees (Unisa, 2013c:1) you must update the research plan, including target dates, in consultation with your supervisor.
2.8.2 Budget

Locke *et al.* (2007:155) write: “every research study has a price tag”. The cost of the research may be indirect or direct. It is important to estimate the cost involved in your research project in the proposal phase.

According to the *policy for master’s and doctoral degrees*, Unisa “will supply all master’s and doctoral candidates with the necessary information regarding financial support, including bursaries” (Unisa, 2013a:5). Information on bursaries for master’s and doctoral studies is available on the Unisa website under “Student funding”.

2.9 Chapter outline

In your research proposal you need to give an indication of the chapter outline of your intended dissertation or thesis. A possible outline of the study could be:

- Table of contents
- Chapter 1: Introduction
- Chapter 2: Conceptual framework
- Chapter 3: Research methodology
- Chapter 4: Research results
- Chapter 5: Conclusion and recommendations
- Bibliography
- Appendices (Roberts, 2004: 130)

2.10 Technical requirements

In the *procedures for master’s and doctoral degrees* (Unisa, 2013c:17–18) it is recommended that at least one and a half spacing should be used (except in the case of footnotes and quotations, which may be in single spacing). The left margin should at least be 3 centimetres wide, and the recommended font size for text is 12 point and for footnotes 10 point. Follow these recommendations from the moment you start to write your research proposal.
Your research supervisor may have additional technical requirements (for example, placement of captions, format of tables/diagrams and font style). Ensure that each submission (draft) to your supervisor adheres to the technical requirements.

Academic writing is different from other genres of writing, and you may find it something of a challenge. Academic writing “has particular formalities, stylistic and professional idioms” (Franklin, 2012:249). Effective academic writing also has a narrative aspect (Franklin, 2012:253). Every aspect of the research proposal should be aligned with the research question and the research objectives. It is always good to revise and edit the whole document before handing it in.

To focus your readers’ attention on a specific point that you want to make, consider using graphics (tables or figures). Keep in mind that the type of graphic that you use in a specific circumstance should be appropriate, otherwise it might be more confusing than helpful (Emerson, 2009:111).

- **Take note**
  
  - More information on the technical requirements of the dissertation or thesis is to be found in the [procedures for master’s and doctoral degrees](https://www.unisa.ac.za) (Unisa, 2013c).
  
  - The different types of tables and figures are discussed in Emerson (2009:111–124).
  
  - Word processing programs (for example Microsoft Word) have functions to help you check your grammar and spelling. There are also formatting functions, which can be used to create various levels of headings for inclusion in a table of contents.
  
  - Try to consult more recent sources for your research – ideally, those published within the past 10 years.

2.11 **Referencing style**
The sources you consult are an extremely important component of your research proposal, and you must acknowledge them correctly. There are many referencing styles (Wentz, 2014:172), but the College of Economic and Management Sciences makes use of the Harvard and APA. Always use the referencing style that is used in your specific subject discipline.

As we stated earlier, various referencing software packages are available free of charge, and the software will assist you with adding in-text citations and compiling your bibliography according to the required referencing style. The library supports Mendeley and RefWorks. Please visit the support site for the software you choose to learn how to use it correctly. The CEMS personal librarians will be able to provide additional training, should you require it.

Unisa (2005) has a strict policy for copyright, infringement and plagiarism. Please familiarise yourself with this extremely important policy.

- **Take note**
  - It is important to discuss the referencing style with your supervisor to ensure that it is in line with the guidelines of the specific subject discipline.
  - Make sure that you read and abide by the policy for copyright infringement and plagiarism of Unisa (Unisa, 2005).
  - When you submit your dissertation or thesis, you must attach a Turn-it-in similarity report to the final document. Turn-it-in is a software program that is able to detect plagiarism in different types of electronic documents. Unisa subscribes to this program, and incidences of plagiarism will be followed up on by the Student Disciplinary Committee (http://www.unisa.ac.za/contents/library/docs/Plagiarism.pdf).
Conclusion

The goal of this study guide has been to assist you in writing your research proposal. In this guide we have offered some important guidelines on how to write a research proposal for your dissertation or thesis. Please remember that specific subject disciplines may have specific requirements, and that you must adhere to these.

The sources used to compile this study guide are listed in the bibliography, and are available in the Unisa library. Please consult them if you would like additional information.

We hope that you have found the information in this guide helpful, and that your proposal will be an excellent foundation for the study to follow.
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