Learning from a Doctoral Research Project: Structure and Content of a Research Proposal

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Abstract: Students have to present a formal research proposal at the time of admission or at the end of their first year study in the case of a doctorate. Many of them feel uncomfortable in preparing such proposals due to lack of experience or knowledge. This paper describes the way a research proposal may be prepared for doctoral projects in social sciences. The paper provides a road map to write a suitable proposal acceptable to their supervisors or examination committee. The proposal is based on a case study undertaken by the author and addresses key issues in preparing a postgraduate proposal including researcher's professional background, selection of topic, research question, research objectives, and importance of the study, scope, methodology, conceptual framework and potential outcome. These themes have been grouped under four parts: the context, the content, the process and the product.

Keywords: research proposal, social sciences, postgraduate study, case study

1. Introduction

The formal research programmes in the educational institutes are meant to train students to practice research as a profession. Many institutes require a formal research proposal for admission. (Onwuegbuzie, 1997) defines a research proposal as "a formal written plan which collimates ideas about a proposed study in order to obtain approval to conduct the study or to seek funding". Students find it difficult to access relevant material and guidance to prepare a reasonable research proposal (RP). The published material does not provide empirical evidence to write a problem solving research proposal. Many students contact the author for guidance in preparing doctoral proposals in management, information systems and other social topics. This stimulates to draft the paper. It is based on a proposal submitted for the doctoral degree and the insight gained through writing the thesis. It would be helpful for the potential candidates who are planning to submit a similar research proposal for any postgraduate study or research since the RP as Sharp et al (2002) argue "establishes both the need for the study and that the researcher has or can acquire the skills and other resources required". And Baker (2000) refers to the contemporary requirements, "doctoral degrees in the social sciences have tended to become more structured and seen more as a professional qualifications than an opportunity to undertake a piece of original research under limited guidance and supervision". The structure of this paper is based on the processual research model developed by Pettigrew et al (1989) and modified by Iqbal (2003). The model was meant to conduct empirical studies or to address an issue. It seems suitable to be used to resolve a research problem that a candidate would try to resolve. The paper has been divided into five sections apart from the introduction and conclusion. The first introduces literature, the second deals with the context, the third looks into the contents, the fourth explores the process of conducting a research project and the fifth envisions the potential outcomes.

2. Literature review

Wood-Harper (1995), for example, said in a doctoral seminar, 'the best piece of research work always address a real life issues and the best thesis is the one which resolves a practical problem'. Production of a problem solving thesis or report is the ultimate objective of any research activity. Endacott (2005) argues that the purpose of such a report is to establish academic credibility of the candidate. The literature on the subject focuses upon general material on research methods, research projects and dissertation. Many contemporary writers on qualitative research or general research such as Kumar (2005), Silverman (2002) Robson (2002) Denzin and Lincoln (1994) Madsen (1992) Birley and Moreland (1999) Sharp et al (2002) ignore the context i.e. 'researcher's background' in establishing the selection of the research topic. General material on the topic deals with the scattered components of a research proposal at random. Writers assume that the researcher will assemble all these components to produce the required documents. However, those who come from natural sciences; to do qualitative research are ill equipped to understand the language of the new (research) discipline. And the material available for preparing a research proposal presents limited empirical evidence (e.g. Endacott, 2005; Baker, 2000; Cadman, 2002; Fessey, 1997; and Haggard, 1996). Therefore this paper is based on the case study and provides the empirical evidence to support the proposed contents. Thus bridging the gap between the literature and student's requirements.

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3. The context

Context is the situation or circumstances within which the researcher reaches about the research project. It helps the researcher to identify the topic of research from his/her own knowledge and experience.

3.1 The researcher's professional background

The professional background includes education, training, work experience and cultural perspective. The purpose of investigating professional background is to identify any clue for the potential research topic. Many dimensions can be researched to discover a researchable subject. Academic history: researchers in social sciences come from diverse backgrounds such as computing, mathematics, economics, management science, political science and sociology, are a few of them. They may like one or more of them; an ideal researcher focuses upon one of them. In many cases further fine-tuning is required. Employment: sometimes current or previous jobs / assignments give clue to select a topic. They can work on one of these projects in their doctoral research projects. Project or dissertation: many have completed postgraduate degrees and worked on a master dissertation / project as a partial requirement of the programme concerned. Personal choice: personal choice about a topic also determines the way forward. Some like quantitative subjects other qualitative topics. Cultural perspective: social and cultural background of the researcher provides clue for the potential research. These four perspectives make up their individual research background. They play a significant role in the research project. For instance, a graduate from a business school can work on an economic topic more comfortably than a chemistry graduate. Iqbal's (2003) migration from a quantitative perspective to a qualitative direction was due to teaching of a non-quantitative subject as against usual quantitative courses such as accounting, finance and operation research. He had utilised an opportunity to move from quantitative perspective to qualitative. It implies that the researcher links his academic and professional history with the research topic. What made it possible to focus on or chose a particular subject of research? Bryman (2001) calls it personal experiences to stimulus for research. He quoted many examples of such drivers: Zukin's interest in loft living was due to her living in a loft; Bryman's interest in Disney parks triggered from a visit to the Disney world. Both examples suggest a human tendency; a social interaction with an object creates nearness to it emotionally and practically. A dissertation in a Master degree can be converted to a doctoral topic.

4. The contents

It includes a number of themes and main body of the proposal.

4.1 Research question (RQ) / statement of the problem

Baker (2000) argues that "the first step (in the development of the proposal) is to define the issue or problem to be addressed in clear and precise terms so that there can be no ambiguity about what is to be attempted". Cadman (2002) suggests key characteristics of a RQ, ''concise, focused... as it acts as a road map for the rest of the proposal ''. Ghauri (1995) and his colleagues say RQ "indicates gaps in the scope or the certainty of our knowledge" Given that a variety of aspects can be incorporated or extracted from RQ. For instance, a student of business administration selected the following research question for his doctoral thesis.

> *How can performance of middle managers be improved in a medium size manufacturing organisations in England?*

Baker (2000) argues that some keywords should emerge from defining the problem or issue. The above RQ indicates a range of dimensions as highlighted in the question. The performance describes the specific topic the researcher wants to explore since many other aspects can be researched including training, development, role in change, turnover, remuneration, decision making pattern, management style, qualities, resistance etc. Secondly, middle managers specify that the researcher rules out senior and operational management and concentrates on middle management only. Thus it provides the focus of research, a helpful strategy to launch a manageable project since the broad topics are difficult to research and pose many problems when generalising. Thirdly, medium size narrows down the number of organisations to be included in the study sample. Here small and large size organisations have been excluded from the population. Similarly, the manufacturing organisation excludes the service organisations and trade organisation from the study. The word England geographically limits the scope of the proposed study. The RQ may determine the research methodology and the data collection strategy. Consider the RQ researched by a researcher in his doctoral research:

> *What is the role of methodology* (focus of the study) *in implementing a radical change initiative* (the topic) *and what other factors can be helpful in introducing process based change in a large organisation* (the research methodology i.e. the case study) *in order to enhance competitiveness through improvement in operational efficiency? Italics added.*

The focus and the topic have been discussed in the above paragraphs. The research methodology needs more explanation. The RQ indicates case study as the proposed research methodology (RM), which in turn limits the data collection strategy. Yin refers (1994) in-depth interviews, artefacts, document analysis, participation and observations (therefore other data collection strategies are ruled out). The data collection strategy leads towards an appropriate data analysis technique (s). Yin (1994) suggests pattern-matching, explanation-building, and time-series analysis. Interviews are transcribed to gain insight about the organisational culture, strategies, policies etc.; time-series are used to analyse surveys. The documents and observations corroborate the interviews and provide additional information to illustrate key findings. The analysis of interviews and qualitative data is more or less a subjective decision since the outcome tends towards describing and understanding rather than producing quantitative results. Thus the data analysis shapes the pattern of conclusion and overall outcome. Sometimes the RQ points out the philosophical assumption underpinning the research. Consider the following RQ:

> *What is the learning (*outcome of the research and philosophical assumption*) from a radical change initiative (the topic) in a medium size manufacturing organisation (*the case study venue*) and how it can be reused to introduce similar changes in other organisations (*applicability*)? Italics added.*

The RQ is about a case study of radical change in a medium size organisation, it demonstrates all the implied parameters as has been discussed above. In addition it points out the philosophical assumption underpinning the research, how the researcher views the world. Two views are well distinguished in the literature: positivistic and interpretive (Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991). Some researchers question the classification (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Gage, 1985; Shulman, 1981) however the purpose of such division is to plan an inquiry. The former assumes that reality is given (Hirschheim, 1992) while later believe it is socially constructed (Walsham, 1993). The *learning* is a core interpretive research topic (Schwandt, 1994), the professional reader or examiner would judge the RQ as such and examine the research proposal in a qualitative perspective. (See below for more details about philosophical assumptions). Babbie (2007) believes that RQ can be explorative, descriptive or explanative. Explorative RQ address a new topic or when the researcher looks into a topic from a new dimension / interest. For instance, Business Process Redesign (BPR) emerged in the early 1990s; managers were curious to know pros and cons of it so that they can introduce it in their organisations. The RQ to conduct such studies may be: How did a certain organisation implement BPR and what were the outcomes of the programme? Descriptive RQ address scientific description to know accurately about a phenomenon. Babbie (p. 89) notes that scientific observation is careful and deliberate. A descriptive RQ looks like: What are the critical success factors for BPR initiatives? What is the percentage of successful BPR projects in service organisations or in the UK? Explanatory RQ explains various dimensions of a phenomenon. According to Babbie (p. 90) identifying variables that explain a fact or event. Why BPR projects fail? Why senior managers' buy-in is essential for a BPR project?

In short, the research question defines the proposal, guides arguments, provokes the interest of the readers and directs the inquiry (UC Berkeley, 2001). A RQ must be original, interesting, feasible to research, enable to produce important results, triggers further research, hypothesis can be formulated and tested based on it, (Wyatt and Guly, 2002) placed in the context of focused and current research area. Formulation requires creativity, ability to think clearly and understanding of problem (Wong, 2002). A good RQ is generative and 'aligned with disciplinary research design principles' (Fincher and Adams, 2004). On the other side of the coin a large number of proposals fail due to absence of a research question (Haggard, 1996) or inappropriate attention to it.

4.2 Research objectives (RO)

Research objective (s) provide focus, reduces the possibility to collect unnecessary data, organise the study in parts or phases (Corlien et al, 2003) and develops a relationship between findings and practical applications (Online sources 2) The purpose of RO is to define the achievements of the research both to the discipline and the organisation / object being investigated. For a case study as indicated above, there should be some visible achievements from the research such as understanding a change initiative, learning gained from the change, its possible application in the future and the theoretical contribution in the discipline concerned. Broadly speaking main objective of a research project is an addition in the existing knowledge, Philip and Pugh (1994) call it originality which according to them is 'making a synthesis that hasn't been made before; using already known material but with a new interpretation, bringing new evidence to bear on

an old issue. The originality can be broken down and supported by the specific objectives of the study, the visible deliverables. Iqbal (2003) set three objectives for his project:

- To understand a radical change initiative within an organisation from design through to implementation.
- To learn from the experience of the company in order to use this for the introduction of a similar change in the future.
- To contribute to the theoretical knowledge or the theory of the discipline concerned.

The first objective is to understand or to examine the radical change initiative undertaken within the organisation. It includes what was done, why the initiative was undertaken, when it was initiated and completed (if it is), and what were the results. The researcher would produce an account of the change programme encompassing these elements. Mason suggests a number of goals for MIS research, for instance, gaining understanding, yielding new products, constructing better systems, contributing to science and gaining tenure (Mason, 1984). Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) endorses understanding as a key objective for assessment of Higher Education Institutions (Sharp et al, 2002). From a philosophical perspective "qualitative research methods are designed to help researchers understand people and the social and cultural contexts within which they live." (Mayers, 1999). In addition, Bryman characterises qualitative research as “understanding actions and meanings in their social context” (Bryman, 1988 quoted by Silverman, 1993). However, understanding is not the only objective.

The second objective implies that what lesson was learned from the programme, for example, information technology was a key enabler for the implementation of process-based change. And how these lessons learned can be applicable to introduce similar change initiative in other organisations, the practical outcome of the research, which has never been produced in the past. In this way the ROs are indicating and guiding towards the achievements of the project. Learning is the result of understanding or gaining knowledge of a phenomenon. It involves making sense of the information at hand (Guba, 1990), because understanding leads to learning and learning leads to change. The final objective is giving a big message i.e. what the study is contributing towards the area of subject involved. Pettigrew et al ‘s (1989) theoretical model or theory had been the basis of this research; the present study is enhancing the model by extending it, a true addition to knowledge. A traffic management department defines its research objective as:

> *The objective of this research project is to evaluate the safety and effectiveness of different signal displays and phasing for Protected/Permissive Left-Turn (PPLT) control. (NCHRP, 2007)*

The researcher should never lose the sight of evaluation of safety and effectiveness of traffic signals. Everything should be written subordinated to the RO, which must be clearly stated (Sharpe et al, 2002). Greenfield (2002) argues that the aim of a research project defines the scope of the study. The researcher and the reader should convince that the study is well worth

4.3 Importance of the study

A brand new RQ and its objectives can further be elaborated to justify both RQ and associated objectives under the banner of importance of the project. The researcher wanted to explore a brand new research problem but why?. What are the key aspects for which the problem is important to the audience or to the world? Importance of the research is an attempt to justify the selection of the topic and creates a link between research problem and objectives. Jerdee and Rosen (2003) state that importance of the topic is one of the five criteria for evaluation of a research proposal. A piece of quotation from Iqbal’s (2003) work sheds light on the rationale of his study:

> *The main concern of this research is the question of the effectiveness/role of a radical change methodology, a subject that has so* far received little attention *from scholars and practitioners.* Previous research *has revolved around the importance of re-engineering as a management tool, its success stories, its enablers (e.g. human, material, change strategy and software) and the need for a methodology to make the change happen. For example, Van Meel* et al *(1994) found that re-engineering methods, new organisational forms, organisational design and information systems design, were the main areas of research.*

There are two aspects worthy of explanation in the quotation: the subject has received little attention in the literature and the evidence of the claim has been provided from the existing literature. The researcher claims that insufficient work has been done on the topic; it implies more research is required to fill the gap. The claim can be made after an extensive literature review on the subject. Endacott (2005) argues that the strongest argument in favour of a topic is to create a gap; the gap that is to be bridged with the study the researcher is going to undertake. This would enhance the possibility of acceptance of the proposal since the claim of the gap in knowledge or organisational practices are based on the solid grounds i.e. work already done by someone. Haggard (1996) suggests that there should be three main contentions: specific bearing

upon the subject, long-term potentials or gains and 'the existence of a professional channel that can use the results'. Thus the literature review is required to identify any gap in the knowledge, which can be bridged through the fresh research. A successful researcher claims a gap in the existing knowledge with evidence.

4.4 Philosophical assumptions

Scientific methods are the fundamental way to generate knowledge through research. It is essential to look at research methods to conceptualise how a research project can be completed and how the objectives of research can be attained with a certain method. These methods have been classified in various ways; some scholars divide them into quantitative and qualitative areas. The qualitative method emphasises description of natural or social events where the researcher tries to develop understanding concerning a social situation, role, group or interaction. According to Stiles (1999) it "shifts the goal of quality control from the objective truth of statements to understanding by people" and Tetnowski (2001) takes it further "Qualitative research seeks to understand the procedural affairs of the targeted social phenomenon; the focus is on how things happen rather than the fact that they happen". Lucke et al., (1987) elaborate the role of researcher and argue that qualitative inquiry uses text or recorded words as a primary source of data. In this way it is 'analytic or interpretive in that the investigator must discern and then articulate often subtle regularities within the data'.

The researcher presents a rich description of context (for instance an organisation) and seeks norms and values in that social setting. He concentrates on inductive analysis rather than deductive analysis and explores what people do or say and then forms his opinion. For Lucke et al (1987) therefore, by this process he creates a theory to explain the data captured in a specific setting. Bryman, (1996) found, "Qualitative research has become a more prominent style of research within the social sciences and within organisation studies in recent years.". Mayer (1997) describes the advantage of qualitative research, it is to 'understand people and social and cultural context within which they live'. Ethnography, case studies, evaluation, historical research, market research etc are eminent qualitative methods (Birley and Moeland, 1998). On the contrary, the quantitative research deals with natural phenomenon, objective analysis and numerical outcomes. The replication is easy to obtain and the researcher places desired constraints on the outcome of a research activity. The researcher attempts to completely control conditions of the study by manipulating, changing or holding constant external influences in which a very limited set of outcome variables are measured (Patton, 1990). The researcher objectively reports reality… thus he projects hard facts, fixed outcomes, which are based on value-free analysis (Silverman, 2000). Social surveys, experiments, official statistics, structured observation and content analysis are common quantitative methods (ibid., p. 3). The advantages claimed by a qualitative approach are transformed to disadvantages under a quantitative paradigm. It does not mean they are mutually exclusive and rivals for scientific inquiry but rather that the researchers can combine them. However, the classification facilitates the research process since some researchers can use the quantitative method more effectively and others the qualitative route.
Iqbal (2003) argues the rationale for selection of a qualitative way:

> *The researcher believes that interpretive paradigm is the suitable alternative to address the research question and to achieve research objective. The reason for developing this assumption is to identify the* direction *of the study and to select* data collection and analysis *strategy. By direction the researcher means the grand technique to be adopted to address the research question and to accomplish research objective(s).*

The philosophical assumption is linked with research question as has been discussed above and is defining the research objective and outcome. An interpretive assumption leads to define qualitative objectives such as understanding or learning. Iqbal's (2003) all three objectives are of qualitative nature. Objectives in turn shape the outcome of the research. For instance, Walsham (1993) believes that the outcome of an interpretive inquiry will be 'understanding' of the phenomenon rather than figures and percentages. Stiles (1999) thinks that qualitative research transferred 'from the objective truth of statements to understanding by people'. The second consideration is to identify research method. Case studies, action research and field experiments are considered qualitative methods (Braa and Vidgen, 1995) whereas surveys are regarded as quantitative approaches (Galliers, 1992). The later is linked with quantitative RQ and corresponding RO. Qualitative approaches emphasis to seeking patterns and themes in the interviews and documents for analysis. While quantitative methods apply graphs, charts, tables and percentages as analytical tools. But the decision of either strategy is related with the philosophical assumption the researcher makes prior to initiation of a research project or anywhere during the research journey.

4.5 Scope of research

It is useful to determine the boundaries of the project to delineate it from similar projects already undertaken or to be conducted in the future. A well thought research project demarcates its scope in term of time period involved, personnel consulted or to be consulted, departments, functions, sites, geographical areas, a particular initiative and so on. Iqbal (2003) limits the scope of his case study by indicating four different aspects of the phenomenon. He states, the research is limited to the study of radical change initiatives within a single organisation, certain general areas remain as the framework and the backdrop:

- The history of the organisation in change perspective;
- The predecessor to radical change or the history of change as a strategy within the company;
- Aspects of the change such as the context of change, the content of change, the process of change, and the external participants in the change;

Two aspects of scope are worthy of consideration: organisation and the change initiative. The research has been limited to the organisation concerned. The purpose is to identify the cultural aspects of the organisation and how it responds to any change initiative. Related to this is the previous change initiative (s) and their outcomes. It helps to evaluate the readiness of the organisation for the new change programme. Various aspects of change are limiting it from the other change programmes in place. Existing employees of BAC have been included in the interviewing process, although the study excludes past and future employees of the organisation. The researcher has drawn these boundaries in order to keep the study within permissible limits, but overlaps can be expected and may communicate something of importance. In summary the company history, previous change initiatives within the organisation, various dimensions of change, methodology, its effectiveness and present employees of the organisation are the key limits.

> *EPA defines the scope of a project as "in determining the scope of research to be addressed in this strategy, ORD limited itself to waste streams and related environmental problems that are of significant priority to the Agency, particularly OSWER and the Regions.*

Two elements are determining the scope: waste stream and related environmental problems and geographical boundaries. The former is the functional responsibility of Environment Protection Agency (EPA) since it manages the waste. And the later is its jurisdiction of functionality. The scope delineates the data required from the data that is not required, thus saves time. For example, EPA's project needs data about waste stream and the related environmental problems. And OSWER and the region are the geographical limits for collection of data. GOA (1991) believes that "linking scope and time in the study design is important because the scope is determined by the difficulty of the topic". It implies the scope also links topic and its complexity with other components of the research.

5. The process

It encompasses research method and the conceptual framework within which the method will be applied.

5.1 Research method

The knowledge can be created through inductive and deductive methods. Brixey et al (2006) 'argue that qualitative data are typically analysed by either a deductive or an inductive method'. Kesten and Pnueli (2005) argue "in the deductive method we present a small set of proof rules and show that this set is sound and relatively complete for verifying universal and existential basic assertional properties over reactive systems." Deductive approach is applied in natural sciences; the researcher conducts one or more experiments about a certain phenomenon and produces an objective outcome. Identical procedures are followed to arrive at alike results, which can be replicated under given assumptions. The inductive approach on the other extreme of the pendulum draws on the hit and trail strategy. Many social situations/instances are observed, recorded or documented to extract a summary of what has been perceived. The purpose of the approach is to take out the findings from the frequent, dominant or significant themes (Thomas, 2003). He developed a general inductive approach (GIA) and purpose of this approach is to develop or establish clear links between the research objectives and the summary. The role, experience and knowledge of the researcher determines the nature of outcome.

The primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies. Key themes are often obscured, reframed or left invisible because of the preconceptions in the data collection and data analysis procedures imposed by deductive data analysis such as those used in

experimental and hypothesis testing research. The following are some of the purposes underlying the development of the general inductive approach. These purposes are similar to other qualitative analysis approaches.

- To condense extensive and varied raw text data into a brief, summary format.
- To establish clear links between the research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data and to ensure these links are both transparent (able to be demonstrated to others) and defensible (justifiable given the objectives of the research).
- To develop of model or theory about the underlying structure of experiences or processes which are evident in the text (raw data).

RQ leads towards the research method (RM), for instance the researcher who wants to investigate the first RQ cited above i.e. 'Performance of middle managers …' can assess the performance of the middle managers through a case study or a survey. The choice depends upon and related with the available resources, time period and requirements of a funding body or examination committee. Personal choice and contextual circumstances also play a role in the selection of the RM. The aims of research also guide the researcher towards choice of a research method. The researcher puts forward the arguments about why other available methods are not suitable for the research and the chosen one is appropriate. Iqbal (2003) argues in favour of the case study method and rules out other available methods for studying an organisation. He says,

> *There are three methods available to conduct a study in an organisation* (Braa and Vidgen, 1995)*: action research, field experiment and case study…* Action research *is aimed at building features through intervention via a planned change initiative over a long period of time. It is restricted to a single entity, the outcomes are difficult to generalise, the researcher cannot control the variables and interpretation depends upon individual researchers. Secondly, the objective of the research is creating understanding rather than intervention. Despite its academic shortcomings, time limitation does not allow the researcher to be involved in an intervention for a relatively longer period of time than a case study. The aim of a* field experiment *is to test hypothesis within a relatively short time period. It is characterised with greater realism. However, it is difficult to find an organisation on which to experiment and even harder to achieve replication. The aim of the research is to create understanding of a phenomenon; hence it is not possible to conduct a field experiment to achieve the objective of the project. In these circumstances, the* case study *seems a convenient way to gain understanding of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context and within a time constraint. Furthermore, the boundaries of the contemporary phenomenon and its context were not clearly evident at the outset of the study, the argument Yin (1994) puts forward in support of a case study. The case study approach concentrates on using historical data to interpret in an unspecified time span, although performance over a three to five year period is considered sufficient in order to arrive at a reasonable conclusion.*

Additional arguments can be brought from the literature in support of the selected method to justify the choice, which should establish relationship between the principal objectives of research with the method. If a quantitative outcome is required such as how many percent of middle managers support a radical change initiative then a survey may be more suitable than a case study. The data collection and analysis strategy is also helpful at this stage. The data can be collected form a variety of sources such as interviews, documents, surveys and observations. Huberman and Miles (1984) and Denzin and Lincoln (2000) provide the classic sources for data collection and analysis tools and techniques.

5.2 The conceptual framework

The conceptual framework is the most difficult but not impossible part of proposal. It defines the relationship between the theoretical foundations of the research with what the researcher wants to do. The researcher provides rationale for the theoretical model chosen and the area of research. For instance, theory T is being applied to evaluate phenomenon A, the resulting combination will be TA. To create such combination the researcher has to seek answers of the following questions:

- What is the broad subject involved?
- What is the theoretical support from the existing repository of knowledge for the subject matter?
- How are they linked with each other?
- How will the researcher apply them to conduct the present study?

In social sciences, researchers deal with human issues such as social issues, work related problems, collective problem of society, economic activity and many more. These issues have been classified into small areas to facilitate understanding and improving situation for the individual and collective welfare. The researcher's task is to identify the principal relation of the topic with the known body of knowledge. For

instance Iqbal (2003) has selected Business Process Reengineering (BPR), which is related with Business and management. Thus the relationship looks like: Social Sciences- Business and management -BPR (a form of change). The theoretical foundation (or development of a theory) of the subject provides a link between the subject and the existing knowledge. It enables the researchers to develop a relation between their areas of concentration to the work already done. Yin (2003) states that the purpose of development of a theory "is to have a sufficient blueprint for your study". He views theory synonymous with understanding to determine "what is being studied" (abid, p. 27). One should not confuse with theory building with theory testing; the real objective at this stage is linking the subject matter with an existing theory. Iqbal (2003) has applied Pettigrew et al's (1989) strategic change theory to evaluate a process-based change initiative in a British organisation. He describes,

> *Pettigrew et al (1989) suggest a research model to examine a strategic change initiative in an organisation through which management can assess changing economic, business and political conditions and implement new strategies in order to improve the firm's competitive performance. The model contains three interrelated but distinctive parts: context, content and process.*
>
> *Business Process Reengineering (BPR), has been defined by Kettinger et al., (1997) as "a form of organisational change characterised by the strategic transformation of inter-related organisational subsystems producing a varied level of impact". is implemented through various methodologies such as Soft System Methodology (SSM) and others. Nevertheless it has not been introduced through Pettigrew et al's above model, the present research will fill the gap and implement BPR through Pettigrew et al's (1989) framework.*

There are many aspects worthy of consideration in the quotation. Pettigrew et al's (1989) framework is a strategic change approach applicable to the study in BPR perspective. The combination of BPR with Pettigrew et al's (1989) model forms the conceptual framework. The BPR would be looked at through the components of Pettigrew et al's (1989) model, which contains three phases: context, content and process. A further relationship can be developed between the chosen area and the Conceptual Framework (CF) to elaborate the CF. It may show the evolution of the chosen area, its related techniques and theories and the way your study fits into the topic. Iqbal (2003) developed such relationship in the figure 1. TQM is the predecessor of BPR and share many characteristics with it. For instance both focus on a common unit for improvement in performance i.e. processes. BPR is more successful in those organisations where TQM was experienced or was in progress since BPR is considered a progression from TQM. MIT's research programme for the role of IT in the 1990s spells out the nature of IT- enabled change; Venkatraman (1991) identified five stages: localised exploitation (LE), internal integration (II), business process redesign/reengineering (BPR), business network redesign (BNR) and business scope redefinition (BSR). The extended model implies that BPR (a successor of TQM) is examined through the lenses of Pettigrew et al's (1989) contextual framework whereas BPR is a part of five stages of IT- enabled strategic change. The extended model explains the relationship between chosen area and the theoretical framework underpinning the research.

6. The product

Fundamental purpose of any research project is to address a problem in the real world that has been identified in the RQ. In this section she/he imagines how far that problem has been resolved as an outcome of the project. The researcher's job is to find out:

- What is the theoretical contribution in the discipline concerned?
- What is the practical role in solving the problem?
- How it enhances the personal and professional development of the researcher?

Any addition to these aspects makes a research worthwhile for the researcher, the discipline and the practitioners. Iqbal (2003) says, theoretically, the project enables the client of the research to understand the process of business re-engineering and the methodology employed, in an organisational, technical and social perspective. Practically the research proposes a modified framework for a radical change implementation. Personally the research will positively contribute to the learning of the researcher and the career prospects will expand. The outcome may include a new theory, artefact, software or major developments in any of these dimensions. Many researchers feel difficulty to imagine what will the actual deliverable. Well it is not meant at this stage that a well understood structure will be defined, rather the potential supervisor or any such committee should be convinced that the research is worthwhile and will ultimately create/modify some thing of importance. This would satisfy them to accept the project so that the candidate can begin his / her research. Things always change and every element of the research proposal is subject to this situation. The final draft of the thesis or research report will be different from the one envisioned at the commencement of the project. However, the proposed outcome highlights some aspects of

it, which is enough at this stage. Finally, a structure of the thesis would be an advantage at this stage of the study that earns additional score and increases the prospects of approval.

7. Conclusion

There was lack of a research proposal for social science researchers based on some empirical evidence in the literature; this paper is an attempt to fulfil the gap. Nine aspects of a problem solving research proposal have been discussed and grouped into four sections: the context, the content, the process and the product. These elements provide a coherent picture of a document judged either by academics to give green signal for the continuation of the study especially in doctoral programmes or funding bodies to offer financial assistance. However, the audience of this type of proposal (the material discussed here) is more academic than practitioners. The addressees of the case study referred to is also academia. The paper can be used independently to compile a research proposal for a social science discipline or can function as a complementary document to other disciplines.

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