International Journal of Environmental Sciences
ISSN: 2229-7359
Vol. 11 No. 23s, 2025
https://www.theaspd.com/ijes.php

Exploring Common Challenges And Coping Strategies In Project Proposal Preparation Among Undergraduate Students: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract– *The ability to write a coherent and structured project proposal is a critical academic skill for undergraduate students. However, many students experience considerable challenges during the proposal development process due to limited exposure to academic writing requirements, insufficient instructional support, and resource constraints. This qualitative study investigates the common challenges faced by undergraduate students in preparing project proposal papers and explores the coping strategies they employed to overcome these obstacles. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five students enrolled at a Malaysian university, and data were analyzed thematically. Four key challenges emerged: lack of familiarity with proposal format, difficulty generating appropriate and original ideas, time management issues, and limited access to quality reference materials. Despite these barriers, students adopted effective strategies such as peer collaboration, consultation with lecturers and experienced peers, referencing previous proposals, and implementing improved time management techniques. The study concludes that while students exhibit adaptability and resourcefulness, institutional support structures remain crucial. The findings underscore the importance of integrating a structured project management module within the academic curriculum to provide students with clear guidance, practical tools, and mentorship opportunities. Such interventions can enhance students' proposal writing competencies and ultimately contribute to improved academic outcomes and research engagement.*

Index Terms– *project proposal, undergraduate students, qualitative analysis, educational support, project management module*

I. INTRODUCTION

Project Management stands as a crucial subject within the academic framework of Universiti Teknologi MARA. As the institution aims to foster a generation of adept and skilled professionals, the importance of a robust Project Management Module cannot be overstated (Irfan et al., 2021). However, several notable research gaps exist within the current educational landscape, warranting the development of a Project Management Module that not only addresses these gaps but also transforms the educational experience for students. The first research gap centers on the recognition of Project Management as a critical subject within Universiti Teknologi MARA. While the institution acknowledges the significance of Project Management, the existing curriculum might not fully encapsulate the depth and breadth of this field. Project Management serves as the backbone of countless industries, from construction to information technology, emphasising the need for a comprehensive and advanced understanding (Hanafi & Mohd Nawi, 2022). The gap lies in the realisation that to truly prepare students for the professional world. In addressing this gap and transforming the educational experience for students, the development of an Advanced Project Management Module is proposed. This module will serve as a comprehensive and immersive learning experience, bridging the divide between theory and practice. The module will delve deeply into the various dimensions of Project Management, expanding beyond the foundational concepts to explore advanced methodologies, industry best practices, and emerging trends. Through a blend of theoretical lectures, case studies, and interactive workshops, students will gain a holistic understanding of Project Management in diverse contexts.

Secondly, completing assessments within the current framework often requires students to develop project proposals. This serves as a practical application of theoretical knowledge. However, a significant

challenge arises as students are often provided with limited guidelines for this crucial task. Designing and developing a project proposal demands a nuanced understanding of project scope, objectives, methodologies, and timelines (Cristóbal et al., 2018). Without clear guidelines and support, students may struggle to produce proposals that reflect their true potential. This gap highlights the need for an Advanced Project Management Module that offers structured guidance and practical tools for developing high-quality project proposals. Hence, this loophole can be addressed by the development of this module, which will offer structured guidance and resources. Students will be introduced to step-by-step frameworks for crafting effective proposals, complete with templates, sample documents, and feedback mechanisms. Workshops and peer review sessions will further enhance their proposal development skills, ensuring that they can confidently articulate project ideas and objectives (Nagy et al, 2023).

Project Management is not merely a theoretical concept; it thrives on practical application and contextual understanding. Many students may not have the opportunity to engage in professional projects during their academic tenure. Thus, one of the assessments for Project Management subject is producing a project proposal to give exposure to the students to the real situation. Project proposal writing is a core component in academic and organizational activities among university students. However, many face significant obstacles due to a lack of prior experience and guidance. The transition from conceptualizing a project to effectively articulating it in formal writing can be daunting, especially for non-technical students (Andrews & Higson, 2008). The ability to develop clear proposals is often assumed rather than explicitly taught (Mason et al., 2014). As a result, they may find it challenging to grasp the complexities and nuances of project management as a whole (Edström, 2018). The gap here is the absence of experiential learning opportunities that can provide students with firsthand insights into project execution, stakeholder management, risk assessment, and other critical aspects of Project Management (Akilova et al., 2021). Thus, the module will incorporate experiential learning components to provide students with hands-on exposure to real-world projects. Collaborations with industry partners, internships, or simulated project environments will immerse students in practical scenarios. They will have the opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge in a practical setting, making informed decisions, managing project constraints, and communicating with stakeholders (Anjum, 2020). The development of an Advanced Project Management Module for Universiti Teknologi MARA addresses significant research gaps within the current educational framework. By offering a comprehensive curriculum, structured guidance for project proposal development, and experiential learning opportunities, this module aims to transform students' understanding and proficiency in Project Management. It is not merely a course but a catalyst for educational transformation, preparing students to excel in their future careers as adept and agile project managers.

This study investigates real-world difficulties faced by students and highlights strategies they independently employed. It offers insight into how institutions can better support students by incorporating structured learning tools such as project management modules.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research indicates that a lack of precise formatting instructions, inadequate instruction in critical thinking, and ineffective time management are the main causes of students' frequent difficulties with academic writing (Wingate, 2006; Chanock, 2000). According to recent research, collaborative learning environments and structured templates are crucial for scaffolding academic tasks (Darby & Lang, 2019). Furthermore, according to educational transformation frameworks, curriculum activities should incorporate 21st-century skills like communication, project planning, and adaptability (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Noor et al. (2023) discovered that while project-based learning programs in Malaysia increased students' self-esteem, they also revealed a recurring deficiency in proposal documentation abilities. Therefore, creating official project planning modules can help close this gap, particularly for inexperienced student as organizers.

Project proposal writing is a difficult and cognitively taxing task, particularly for undergraduate students who are frequently exposed to this genre for the first time. According to recent studies, these difficulties are caused by more general problems such as a lack of instructional support, cognitive overload, and a lack of familiarity with academic writing conventions rather than just a lack of skill (Lee et al., 2022; Kumar & Patel, 2023). Understanding the format and structure of proposals, coming up with workable

project ideas, efficiently managing time, and gaining access to pertinent academic resources are some of the most commonly mentioned difficulties.

Understanding the formal structure and requirements of a project proposal is one of the main challenges that students encounter. In contrast to essays or reports, proposals need to be organized differently. Each section, such as the background, problem statement, objectives, methodology, timeline, and budget, has a specific purpose and writing style. Many students, particularly those from academic fields other than research, are not familiar with these conventions (Turner, 2024). According to Chen et al. (2021), student proposals that lack standardized instruction in academic writing may contain structural irregularities, ill-defined research questions, and insufficient methodological justifications.

Another major challenge is coming up with a workable and research-worthy idea. Students frequently find it difficult to choose subjects that are both novel and doable given the limitations of their academic program, such as time, scope, or data availability. This is especially true for students who have little experience in their field of study or who have never been exposed to academic research, as Rezeki et al. (2023) point out. Sometimes students pick topics that are too broad or trivial, or they choose ones that are too ambitious, both of which detract from the proposal's quality.

Apart from that, managing one's time effectively is a common challenge when writing a proposal. In addition to writing, proposal development calls for reading, brainstorming, drafting, and revising—tasks that take a lot of preparation and work. Many undergraduates have conflicting academic obligations, which makes it difficult for them to allocate time for proposal development (Lee, Tan, & Wong, 2022). Stress, procrastination, and last-minute submissions are signs of more serious time management issues that lower the calibre of student work.

One of the biggest obstacles still remains the availability of resources, both in the form of scholarly references and real-world examples. Students are frequently uncertain about what makes a well-written proposal in the absence of explicit templates or sample proposals. According to Kumar and Patel (2023), this ambiguity breeds doubt and erodes students' trust in their work. The problem is made worse in certain universities by students' complaints of having little access to databases, advice, and supervision (Noor et al., 2023). The difficulties in writing proposals are complex and interconnected. A thorough support network that includes time management training, mentorship, access to academic resources, and structured writing instruction is necessary to address these. Many students are still ill-prepared to write strong proposals that satisfy professional and academic requirements in the absence of such interventions.

The design of the proposed Advanced Project Management Module is underpinned by established educational theories to ensure effective and transformative learning outcomes. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory provides the core framework by emphasizing learning as a process where knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Kolb (1984) outlines a four-stage learning cycle—concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation—which aligns closely with the module's inclusion of real-world projects, industry engagement, and simulations. This is further supported by the Project-Based Learning (PBL) approach, which facilitates student-centered learning through the completion of complex, authentic projects over an extended period (Thomas, 2000). PBL enhances critical thinking, collaboration, and application of knowledge—skills central to project management proficiency.

To assess and structure the intended learning outcomes, Bloom's Taxonomy serves as a guiding model, especially its revised version which prioritizes higher-order thinking skills such as analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). These cognitive levels are explicitly targeted through activities like project proposal development and scenario-based case studies. Additionally, the module adopts a Competency-Based Education (CBE) framework, which emphasizes the demonstration of specific, measurable competencies required in professional practice (Le, Wolfe, & Steinberg, 2014). By focusing on mastery rather than time-based progression, CBE ensures that students not only understand theoretical principles but can also apply them in real-world contexts. The integration of these theories and models collectively reinforces the module's objective to equip students with both the knowledge and practical competencies necessary to excel in project management roles.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the challenges faced by undergraduate students during project proposal preparation and the strategies they employed to overcome them. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for capturing the depth and complexity of students' experiences, allowing for rich, detailed insights that are not easily accessible through quantitative methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A. Research Design and Rationale

B. Participant Selection

A total of five undergraduate students from a Malaysian public university were selected using purposive sampling. Participants were chosen based on their recent experience in developing project proposal papers as part of their coursework or co-curricular initiatives. This sampling strategy ensured that participants possessed direct and relevant knowledge of the phenomenon under study (Palinkas et al., 2015). The sample included students from diverse academic backgrounds, enhancing the transferability of the findings.

C. Data Collection

The data for this study were collected through individual semi-structured interviews conducted with five undergraduate students who had completed the Project Management course. Each interview session lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted in May 2025. The interviews were designed to allow participants the freedom to express their thoughts openly and reflect on their personal experiences with proposal writing. This flexible format enabled the collection of rich, in-depth qualitative data. All sessions were recorded with consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis, which facilitated the identification of recurring patterns and unique insights across participants.

D. Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis - Thematic analysis from the interview.

Step 1: Familiarization with Data

Transcribe interviews or notes, and read through them multiple times to become familiar with the data.

Step 2: Generating Initial Codes

Begin coding the data by identifying segments of the text that relate to the research questions or recurring patterns.

Step 3: Searching for Themes

Group codes into broader categories or themes. Themes should capture something significant about the data in relation to your research question.

Step 4: Reviewing Themes

Review the themes and refine them by checking if they work with the coded data. Some themes may need to be split or combined.

Step 5: Defining and Naming Themes

Clearly define each theme and sub-theme, and ensure they reflect the data accurately.

Step 6: Producing the Report

Once the themes are finalized, a report was prepared that explains the key findings, linking back to the research question in producing the module.

E. Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was supported through member validation and triangulation of responses. Dependability and confirmability were addressed by maintaining an audit trail of analytical decisions and reflections. Thick description was used to enhance transferability, allowing readers to assess the applicability of findings to other contexts.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Common Issues in Proposal Preparation

Through thematic analysis of student interviews, four recurring challenges emerged in the process of project proposal preparation: lack of understanding of proposal format, difficulty generating ideas, time constraints, and limited access to references. These themes are consistent with current literature on undergraduate academic writing challenges.

1) Lack of Understanding of Proposal Format

One of the most frequent issues was misunderstanding the structure and components of a standard project proposal. Students commonly expressed concerns about the appropriate sequence of proposal elements, such as the problem statement, objectives, technique, timetable, and projected outcomes. The most perplexed were those who had never utilized academic writing previously. One participant said, "I didn't know the correct format to use... it was very confusing" (Informant 4).

This difficulty has been well documented in academic study. Idrus (2023) asserts that students usually misinterpret the expectations for their academic success when instructions are vague or non-existent. More recently, Turner (2024) found that students who lacked formal proposal writing instruction or access to exemplars were more likely to submit poorly structured or incomplete documents. These structural uncertainties impede the proposal's logical development and may obscure the study's goal. According to Chen et al. (2021), the lack of structuring in writing teaching appears to be a systemic issue that affects students' confidence and performance.

2) Difficulty Generating Ideas

Developing a research-worthy and original project idea emerged as another critical challenge. Several students indicated that they lacked the inspiration or confidence to formulate viable project topics. As one informant expressed, "No idea what project to do at all" (Informant 2). This reflects a gap in ideation skills and topic formulation on essential foundation of any research proposal.

According to Rezeki et al. (2023), students often struggle with topic selection due to inexperience with research, limited exposure to current issues, or a fear of proposing something too ambitious. Additionally, a lack of brainstorming frameworks or creativity-focused activities in academic curricula can hinder students from exploring innovative project ideas (Liu & Wang, 2022). This stagnation is exacerbated when students do not receive formative feedback during early-stage planning.

3) Time Constraints

Another theme that prominently emerged was the issue of time management. Students reported challenges balancing multiple academic responsibilities, resulting in inadequate time for thorough research and proposal drafting. "We were overwhelmed with other assignments, so it was hard to focus on the proposal" (Informant 5) aptly summarizes this sentiment.

This challenge is echoed in the findings of Lee, Tan, and Wong (2022), who noted that students often prioritize graded coursework over research proposals due to academic pressure. Poor time allocation leads to last-minute writing, increased anxiety, and diminished proposal quality. Without proper training in workload planning or access to time management tools, students are likely to continue experiencing these bottlenecks in their academic progress.

4) Limited Access to References

The final common challenge involved insufficient access to high-quality references and examples. Students felt constrained by a lack of sample proposals or guidance materials, particularly when attempting to develop unconventional or creative projects. "*The materials we had were very limited, especially if we wanted to think outside the box*" (Informant 1) reflects this frustration.

A lack of access to academic journals, proposal repositories, and writing support materials not only limits content development but also undermines student confidence (Kumar & Patel, 2023). Noor et al. (2023) emphasized that equitable access to research resources is a critical factor in supporting student-led project development. Institutions must ensure that students, regardless of background or experience, have the tools needed to learn by example and explore innovative ideas with clarity and direction.

Despite the challenges encountered during project proposal preparation, students demonstrated notable resilience by adopting a variety of coping strategies. These included peer collaboration, consultation with lecturers and experienced peers, referencing past proposals, and implementing improved time management practices. The thematic analysis revealed that these strategies significantly contributed to students' ability to navigate uncertainty, enhance their writing, and improve proposal quality.

B. Strategies to Overcome Challenges

1) Peer Collaboration and Group Discussions

Collaborative learning emerged as a key support mechanism. Students reported that group discussions with project teammates allowed them to exchange ideas, clarify misunderstandings, and refine their project concepts. As informant 3 noted, "*We had group meetings to discuss what kind of project to do*." These collaborative sessions helped reduce the cognitive load associated with working independently and fostered a shared sense of responsibility.

The role of peer collaboration in enhancing academic performance is well supported in the literature. According to Vygotskian theory, social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of higher-order thinking (Vygotsky, 1978). More recent studies emphasize that peer discussions encourage diverse perspectives and mutual learning, leading to deeper engagement with academic tasks (Darby & Lang, 2019). This strategy is particularly effective in reducing anxiety and fostering creativity during the ideation phase of proposal development.

2) Consultation with Lectures and Seniors

Another critical strategy was seeking guidance from faculty members and senior students. Participants described how consultations provided direction, ensured alignment with academic expectations, and helped them correct misconceptions early in the process. As Informant 1 shared, "*I always consulted my lecturer to check if we were on the right track*".

This approach reflects Schillings et. al.'s (2023) findings, which highlight the importance of academic discussion in promoting metacognitive awareness and improving the quality of student work. Moreover, feedback from lecturers serves as a formative assessment tool, allowing students to refine their proposals through iterative improvements (Hamzah et al., 2021). Interaction with experienced peers also helps bridge knowledge gaps, especially for students unfamiliar with research conventions.

3) Use of Past Proposals as Templates

Students frequently relied on past proposals and club documentation to guide their structure and content development. As noted by Informants 2 and 4, "*We referred to past projects from seniors and club documents*". These references served as cognitive scaffolds, providing concrete examples of how to frame objectives, design methodology, and format the proposal.

Chen et al. (2021) argue that access to model texts helps students internalize genre-specific conventions and improves their academic writing performance. Exemplar-based learning is especially useful when explicit instruction is limited or when students lack confidence in their writing skills. The use of templates also reduces ambiguity and aligns student output with institutional expectations (Turner, 2024).

4) Improved Time Management

Students who succeeded in producing well-developed proposals attributed part of their success to effective time management. They reported adopting personal planning tools and scheduling techniques to balance their academic workload. As Informant 5 observed, "*I planned my time better to balance both the project and other tasks".*

Lee et al. (2022) support this finding, noting that time management is positively correlated with academic performance and student well-being. Structured time allocation reduces last-minute stress and allows students to revise and refine their proposals more thoroughly. Universities can further support this by embedding time management training into academic skills modules, particularly for first-year students who may be unfamiliar with independent learning strategies.

In summary, students employed a range of adaptive strategies to overcome challenges in proposal writing. These strategies were not only reactive but also proactive, emphasizing students' capacity for self-regulated learning and resourcefulness. Educational institutions should recognize and reinforce these approaches by creating structured opportunities for collaboration, mentorship, resource access, and time management skill development.

These strategies echo the findings of Heald, Lengyel, & Wolpert (2023), who emphasized the importance of contextual learning, and Darby & Lang (2019), who advocated for collaborative engagement. Participants also expressed a strong need for a formal project management module, which would include formatting guides, real case studies, and submission templates to aid in understanding and execution.

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings of this study offer several critical implications for higher education institutions, curriculum designers, and academic support services. As project proposal writing becomes an increasingly essential component of undergraduate learning—especially within research-based, community engagement, and capstone activities—it is imperative to provide students with the tools and environment necessary for success. The issues and strategies identified in this study underscore the importance of structural, pedagogical, and resource-based interventions that can enhance the quality and confidence of student writing.

A. Development of a Structured Project Proposal Module

One of the most urgent needs identified through student feedback is the lack of a formalized instructional framework for project proposal writing. Institutions should consider developing and embedding a structured project proposal module within relevant coursework. This module should include instruction on format and structure, topic selection, literature synthesis, and methodology formulation. It must also incorporate formative assessments such as proposal drafts and feedback sessions. Studies by Mason et al. (2014) and Turner (2024) suggest that when academic writing is integrated as a scaffolded process rather than a one-time submission, students demonstrate significant improvement in both content and coherence.

B. Role of Faculty as Active Mentors

Educators must move beyond the role of passive evaluators to become active mentors in the proposal development process. As students indicated, consultation with lecturers was among the most effective strategies for overcoming uncertainty and improving the quality of their proposals. To institutionalize this practice, universities should establish clear guidelines for lecturer-student mentoring, including regular office hours, proposal feedback timelines, and even interdisciplinary writing clinics. Faculty development programs can further equip instructors with tools to deliver constructive feedback and mentor students effectively in proposal-based assessments (Boud & Molloy, 2013).

C. Enhancing Access to Resources and Exemplars

Universities must invest in expanding students' access to academic writing resources. This includes online databases, writing guides, proposal templates, annotated exemplars, and citation management tools. As supported by Chen et al. (2021), students benefit significantly from observing and analyzing well-crafted samples. Institutions could create centralized repositories of high-quality proposals categorized by faculty, project type, and complexity. In doing so, they not only democratize access to learning materials but also build a culture of transparency and academic modeling.

D. Institutional Support for Peer Learning and Collaboration

Peer collaboration has been shown to be an effective and low-cost support strategy. Institutions can encourage this through the establishment of peer mentoring programs, writing groups, and interdisciplinary project teams. These settings allow students to gain feedback, discuss ideas, and improve confidence in their writing (Darby & Lang, 2019). Furthermore, collaborative tools such as discussion forums and shared editing platforms (e.g., Google Docs, Microsoft Teams) should be integrated into project-based courses to facilitate synchronous and asynchronous peer engagement.

E. Training in Time and Project Management Skills

Given the strong link between time constraints and writing difficulties, universities should also consider integrating time management and project planning instruction into first-year experience programs or academic skills workshops. Tools such as Gantt charts, digital planners, and workload trackers can be introduced early in a student's academic journey. According to Lee et al. (2022), such interventions contribute not only to improved academic performance but also to reduced stress and better student mental health outcomes.

F. Leveraging Technology for Writing Support

The digital transformation of higher education presents opportunities for institutions to incorporate technology into academic writing support. Automated writing feedback tools (e.g., Grammarly, Hemingway Editor), plagiarism checkers, and AI-based research assistants can enhance the proposal writing process. These tools allow for immediate, personalized feedback and serve as additional resources for students navigating complex writing tasks. Integrating such platforms within university portals or learning management systems (LMS) ensures broader accessibility and normalization of these aids within academic workflows (Asana, 2025; Liu & Wang, 2022).

The educational strategies proposed above are not meant to operate in isolation but rather as part of an integrated support ecosystem for student writers. By implementing targeted interventions at institutional, faculty, and peer levels, higher education can significantly reduce the challenges associated with project proposal writing. These implications advocate for a proactive, student-centered approach that emphasizes inclusivity, accessibility, and structured learning in academic writing.

CONCLUSION

Undergraduate students typically encounter a number of challenges when creating project proposals, including unclear formatting instructions, difficulty generating feasible and original ideas, time constraints resulting from competing academic commitments, and restricted access to trustworthy reference materials. These difficulties enhance their worry, procrastination, and lack of confidence when writing for academic audiences, in addition to making their ideas less cohesive and well-structured.

However, the results of the study indicate that students demonstrate resilience and adaptation through the use of strategies such as group projects, speaking with lecturers and seniors, using prior proposals as a guide, and improving time management. These coping mechanisms significantly lessen the difficulties involved in creating proposals and enhance students' ability to produce documents that are both cohesive and academically sound.

To build on these particular approaches, higher education institutions need to construct a systematic support framework specifically for project proposal development. By implementing a formal project management module that includes writing guides, proposal templates, time-planning tools, and academic mentoring opportunities, it is possible to ensure consistency in student learning and bridge the gap between expectations and results. This type of module not only fosters academic success but also gives students transferable skills in planning, communication, and project execution—all of which are essential for future professional endeavors.

In conclusion, resolving the root causes of students' difficulties with proposal writing through institutional interventions is necessary to establish a more equitable and effective learning environment. With the correct support, undergraduate students can transform from weak writers to confident project managers capable of making important contributions to both academic and applied research.

ACKNOWLEDNEMENT

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), for the financial support provided under the research grant (File No: 600-TNCPI 5/3/DDF (FSPPP) (001/2024)). This research, titled "Developing an Advance Project Management Module for Educational Transformation", is funded under the Phase 01/2024 University-level initiative in the field of Social Sciences (Field Code: F7010000). The support received from the faculty has been instrumental in facilitating the progress and execution of this project, which runs from 1st June 2024 to 30th May 2026.

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