



THE NEXUS BETWEEN THE IDENTIFICATION OF A RESEARCH PROBLEM AND THE SUCCESS OF A RESEARCH ENDEAVOUR

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Abstract

The statement of the problem is a very significant aspect of any research undertaking. Its importance to research endeavour cannot be overemphasized because it lies at the heart of a research. Despite the critical nature of this element of a research, many research students hardly get it right; as such they go through pains trying to articulate a focused and result oriented statement of research problem. This paper, therefore, identifies and examines the key issues in writing a statement of problem. The paper relied on documentary approach to generate secondary information. The paper established that the successful outcome or otherwise of any research endeavour is determined by how well the research problem is defined. The paper recommends that students should endeavour to always submit a felt problem rather than a perceived problem in the form of research topic.

Keywords: Statement of Problem, Variables, Questions, Hypotheses, Objective

Introduction

Research is a systematic endeavour that requires logical procedures and one of such procedures is “statement of the problem”. Statement of the problem lies at the ‘heart’ of any research undertaking. This is because it is the unifying thread that runs throughout all the elements of the project, dissertation or thesis. It is on this note that Obasi (1999) says that the research problem is the fulcrum or hub around which the research objectives and hypotheses revolve. According to him, the objectives and hypotheses derive their meaning from the research problem and when divorced from it, the research becomes unfocused and meaningless. In essence, a well-articulated statement of research must be directly related to the objectives and the associated research questions and hypotheses. Despite the importance of this key element of research, most research students, according to Obasi (1999) hardly get it right, as such they go through serious agony in trying to articulate a clear, unambiguous and result oriented statement of problem. The paper, therefore, identifies and examines the key issues in writing statement of problem and to achieve this, the paper adopts a documentary approach to generate secondary information from textbooks, journals and internet. The contents of these documents were analysed and conclusion arrived at. The paper is divided into five (5) sections. Section one is the introduction, section two is conceptual clarifications, section three examines the nexus between research problem and successful research

endeavour, section four examines the key issues in articulating statement of problem in research endeavour and finally, section five provides the conclusion of the

Conceptual Clarifications

Scholars have viewed research from different perspectives. According to Selttiz, Wrightman and Cook (1976), research involves ‘taking a look or another look or to search and search again and to find out more information about something.’ In the opinion of Abdul-Maliq (2006), the need to look or look again may be that there had equally been no search before or the search was inconclusive, incomplete, considered false or incorrect in the light of new evidence or that the researcher wishes to reaffirm the continued relevance of the principles or theories derived from such previous searches. Cohen and Manion (1987) defined research as “the systematic and scholarly application of the principles of the scientific method to finding solutions to problems”. In the same vein, Gay (1989), sees research as “the formal, and systematic application of the scientific method to the study of problems. Akindele, (2008) see research as the application of scientific procedure in discovering answers to questions through collection, analysis and interpretation of data. It is evident from the foregoing scholarly definitions that research is a systematic endeavour that must be conducted in an orderly, scientific or controlled manner and verifiable conclusion reached. The process usually begins with the identification of a problem.

A research problem, therefore, in the opinion of Natalie (1995), is an inquiry which asks to what degree or how two or more phenomena are related and usually stated in question form. According to him, in all experimental research, there are two sets of variables – the dependent and the independent variables. The dependent variable is the phenomenon or characteristics hypothesized to be outcome, effect, consequent or output of some input while the independent variable is the phenomenon or characteristic hypothesized to be the input or antecedent variable. It is presumed to cause the dependent variable. He submitted that the research problem often comes about by considering dependent variable. Example, is – why did the students’ performance (dependent variable) decline? The independent variable is therefore the presumed causes of decline in the students’ performance.

Similarly, in the opinion of Obasi (1999), research problem is the fundamental question that requires an answer. He went further to say that it is the most worrying issue or task that needs to be properly examined and understood. He also says it is a fundamental question because many other specific research questions derive from it. Also, Ozohu-Suleiman (2005), opines that a research problem can be seen as the gap in knowledge, which the researcher may have observed. According to Ozohu-Suleiman (2005), any research endeavour must begin with a clear understanding of the research problem. For Kothari (2009), research problem refers to some difficulties which a researcher experiences in the context of either a theoretical or practical situation and wants to obtain a solution for same. In the views of Onyishi and Omemma (2010), a research problem is a phenomenon whose cause is unknown. According to them, beyond not knowing the cause of the problem, it has to be established that the problem has become a pain in the neck of the society.

Implicit in the above definitions is that a research problem:

- i. Establishes a gap in knowledge
- ii. Should be significant enough to warrant research, in other words, the problem should affect a significant number of people.

- iii. Should establish a relationship between two or more variables.
- iv. Evolves in a question form to which a solution is sought.

Sources of Research Problem

One of the major challenges faced by researchers is locating a researchable problem. As a result, Olaegbe, Vincent and Sobona (2006) have suggested the following sources of research problem.

- (a) **Literature Review:** According to Olaegbe, et al (2006), reading books, encyclopedia, journals, periodicals, as well as some research works in an area of interest to the researcher, would provide him with sufficient insight into the areas of problems in the field. Leed and Ormrod in (Ochim and Chima, 2013) also emphasized reading of literature when they posited that reading the literature would enable the researcher to know things that are already known about the topic of interest. Similarly too, (Ross cited in Olakunle and Bankole, 2010) identified reading a current news magazine, a scholarly periodical, encyclopaedia or other publications as potential sources of research problem. According to them, by reading such publication, you may come across something which you strongly disagree with. This is a good start because you could then set out to disprove the ideas in the article through research. On the other hand, you may discover an article that opens up an aspect of a subject that interests you, thus leading into a research project. In the same vein, Ekhaton (2005) agreed that the only way out of the difficulties in formulating research problem is to read wide on the topic so as to have better understanding of the problem.
- (b) **Personal Experience:** The second source of research problem, according to Olaegbe, et al (2006) is personal experience. Some students encounter some problems requiring investigation in the course of the professional training. Such personal experiences could come through lectures, fieldwork, seminar, conferences and other related activities. Careful observations of the existing practices in the pertinent areas of interest will make the student to identify very useful problems. Ross in (Olakunle and Bankole, 2010) corroborated this view by identifying past experiences such as personal experiences, especially direct observations as one of the key sources of a research problem.
- (c) **Environmental Affairs and Situations:** Environmental affairs and situation is another source of research problem suggested by Olaegbe, et al (2006). These are situations that affect people in our environment. Ross in (Olakunle and Bankole, 2010) referred to this as Goings-on in an organisation or environment. This implies prevailing social phenomenon that has generated sufficient curiosity within an environment or organisation. For example, the Boko Haram phenomenon is a source of research problem. Since the insurgency started, many questions have continued to beg for answers. These questions can be organized and articulated into research problem.
- (d) **Theory:** Olaegbe, et al (2006) also identifies theory as a source of research problem. Theory is a set of propositions, which can account for or explain certain phenomena or events. It is a system for providing explanations about phenomena. Theories give rise to deductions, which needs to be tested. These deductions from theories constitute good problems. Anthony (2012) agreed that theories could be another source of research problem. In his words, shortcoming in theories could be researched.

Criteria for Selecting a Research Problem

Olaegbe, et al (2006) identified the following as basic criteria for selecting a research problem:

- i) **Interest:** Without interest, nothing seems to start and end well. This is so especially when one is trying to inquire into the unknown. Interest stimulates the will-power to engage in a research. It should however, be noted that a research problem should not be of interest to the researcher alone, it should be of interest to other researchers. Other researchers will want to know if the solution to the problem will advance knowledge in the field appreciably. Umar, (2005) supported this view when he said progress in research will be faster, and more fulfilling if the researcher is genuinely interested in the problem.
- ii) **Uniqueness:** Uniqueness implies that a research problem should have originality in either purpose or method to avoid objectionable duplication.
- iii) **Availability of Data and Instrument:** The researcher must be sure that satisfactory data is available and an appropriate instrument exists for the collection of the necessary information for the research study to be undertaken.
- iv) **Financial Support:** One cannot rule out financial commitment each time research works are being carried out. The researcher must ensure he has the financial strength to conduct the research.
- v) **Theoretical Value:** Every research, according to Olaegbe, et al (2006) should have theoretical value. The problem must fill a gap in the literature and contribute to advancement in knowledge.
- vi) **Time Factor:** At the point of selecting a research problem, the researcher should be conscious of the time factor. That is, he should be sure that he would have enough time to complete the research.

The Nexus between Research Problem and Successful Research Endeavour

The relationship between research problem and a successful research endeavour cannot be overemphasized. The research problem is the centre around which the entire research revolves. A well identified and articulated research problem can be considered as the engine room of a research project, thesis or dissertation. Although each step in a research is important, problem definition is not only the most important (Malhorta and Birks, 2000); but also the most difficult (Tukman, 1978). Isah (2005), corroborated these views when he opined that the identification and definition of the research problem is the first step in the research process and, of course, the most difficult. A good number of research students find it very hard to identify and clearly state a result oriented research problem and the consequences is that the entire research becomes unfocused and lack direction.

Research is a systematic endeavour; as such the research problem is like a connecting thread that runs throughout the whole process. According to Obasi, (1999), the research question, research objectives and hypotheses derive their meanings from the research problem. They must all be linked in a consistent manner, otherwise the research will lack direction and the whole essence of conducting the research would be defeated. Obasi (1999), advised that research students should avoid the common error of stating hypotheses, questions and objectives that stand in isolation of the research problem. Onyishi and Omemma (2010) agreed that the research questions, hypotheses and objectives are intimately related to the research problem.

The foregoing scholarly submissions have clearly demonstrated that for a successful research endeavour, the researcher has to:

- a) Identify and clearly state the research problem which must not be ambiguous or vague.
- b) The research problem must intimately be related to the research questions, hypotheses and the objectives.

The movement these have been achieved, the other aspects of the research will automatically fall in line with the researcher's expectation.

Articulating Statement of Problem in a Research Endeavour

A very important aspect of any research is stating adequately the statement of the research problem (Kerlinger, 1973). According to him, there is no one "right" way to state a problem but it can come as interrogative sentence or statement that asks: what relationship exists between two or more variables? Kerlinger (1973) likened a good problem statement to laying a good foundation of a building. If the foundation is not properly made, the house may crumble. He went further to say that in a research study, if the problem is not clearly stated, the student will run into a big problem in doing a good research. The inability to properly state a problem often forces students to plagiarise or cook up data.

Osuala (1982), opined that the statement of the problem serves to elaborate upon the information implied in the title of the study. In his view, the statement of the problem should be set forth in brief but quite specific terms so that even an unformed reader may secure an idea of the nature of the problem which underlies the rationale for the study. He further submits that the research problem can be stated in a question form or by examining issues and concerns and stating them in a problem form. Akindele, (2008), corroborated the opinion of Osuala (1982) when he said that the statement of the problem simply explains or elaborates upon the information implied in the title of the study. Also, Obasi (1999) says that the statement of the problem is the most crucial introductory issue in any research. In his words, under the statement of problem, the researcher is expected to examine the 'why' related issues. The researcher is expected to raise questions that attract curiosity and expectation in terms of answers. The 'why' of an issue differs from its 'how'. He also says in a research undertaking, we can describe and state what exists under the background, while we raise questions as to why it exists under the statement of problem.

Obasi (1999) went further to highlight what statement of problem in a research undertaking is not. According to him, statement of problem is not the listing of problems that a researcher encounters in a study such as dearth of literature and in inadequate fund. A statement of problem is not the listing of problems one expect to identify in a study or one already identified in a study. This is clearly supported by Abdul-Maliq (2006) when he stated that a problem statement is not the problem faced by the researcher(s) while carrying out the research nor is it the problem faced by the case study (if there is one). Obasi (1999) further said that statement of problem is not the section for stating the purpose of the study or its significance.

In presenting a result oriented statement of problem, Obasi (1999) suggested different styles. First, one can be argumentative in approach by raising doubt to what apparently exists, or disagreeing right away from what apparently (seemingly) looks accepted. Secondly, one can be declarative in style by making assertive statement(s) from a particular school of thought which is of course subject to further investigation. Akindele, (2008) supported this style when he opined that a

statement of problem is a declarative statement, which state precisely and succinctly the issue being studied in the paper. Thirdly, according to Obasi (1999) one can be historically analytical by critically looking at antecedence to an issue. This is different from being historically descriptive as done under the background of study. He suggested that a researcher can proceed by looking at the findings of other scholars or theoretical postulations which require further investigation. He summed up by saying that whichever style one adopts at the end of the day, the statement of problem is reduced to specific researchable questions. It is on this note that Ekhaton (2005) opined that in a research, the statement of the problem must capture clearly the problem the researcher intends to examine and must be as specific as possible. He said that it must be done in such a manner that the nature and extent of the research problem become easily known and understood by the reader.

In the opinion of Ozohu-Suleiman (2005), the statement of the problem attempts to capture the deviation between what is known and what the researcher seeks to know about a given phenomenon. He proceeded to bring out two elements of a research statement; a statement of what is known about the phenomenon under investigation and a statement of what is yet to be known. He further suggested that the problem should be presented in such a way as to arouse the curiosity of the audience. In other words, it should be inherently persuasive.

In the view of Bwisa (2012), a persuasive problem statement consists of three parts: the ideal, the reality and the consequences. The ideal describes a desired goal or ideal situation; it explains how things should be. The reality describes a condition that prevents the goal, state or value from being achieved or realized. It explains how the current situation falls short of the goal or ideal. The consequences identify the way the researcher proposes to improve the current situation and move it closer to the goal or ideal. On this note, Bwisa identified four (4) simple steps to write a statement of problem.

Step 1 (Statement 1)

Construct statement 1 by describing a goal or desired state of a given situation or phenomenon. This will build the ideal situation (what should be, what is expected, desired).

Step 2 (Statement 2)

Describe a condition that prevents the goals, state, or value discussed in step 1 from being achieved or realized at the present time. This will build the reality, the situation as it is and establish a gap between what ought to be and what is.

Step 3

Connect steps 1 and 2 using term such as “but”, “however”, “unfortunately”, or “in spite of”;

Step 4 (Statement 3)

Using specific details show how the situation in step 2 contains little promise of improvement unless something is done. Then emphasize the benefits of research by projecting the consequences of possible solutions as well.

The foregoing scholarly opinions regarding statement of problem in a research endeavour have clearly revealed the following:

- 1) The statement of problem is concerned with a relation between two or more variables.
- 2) The statement of the problem should be amenable to empirical testing.
- 3) The research statement should limit the scope of the study.
- 4) The analysis also revealed that there should be a relationship between the title of the study and the statement of the problem.
- 5) The problem statement should provide the context for the research study and generate questions which the researcher hope to answer.

Typical Samples of a Properly Articulated Statement of Problem

Using Bwisa's four steps approach, this paper has provided the following illustrations of a properly articulated statement of research problem.

Sample 1

Topic: National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) and Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria.

Step I (Statement I): Stating the goal or desired state of a given situation or phenomenon.

To alleviate poverty and improve the living conditions of its people, successive Nigerian government have initiated several programmes (Adeyeye, 1987). Some of these programmes include Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructures (DFRR, 1986), National Directorate of Employment (NDE, 1986), Operation Feed the Nation (OFN, 1977) and of recent, the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP, 2001).

Step 2 (Statement 2): The reality of the situation as at present.

In spite of the existence of these poverty alleviation programmes, the incidence of poverty in Nigeria is still on the increase (Adeyeye, 1987). Similarly, the World Bank (2001) stated that rather than record remarkable progress in national poverty level, Nigeria retrogressed to become one of the 25 poorest countries at the threshold of twenty-first century whereas she was among the richest 50 in the early 1970s. Official statistics shows that in 1980, the national (average) poverty incidence was 28.1 percent of the population. By 1985, the national (average) poverty incidence had risen to 46.3 percent. As at 1996, the national average stood at 65.6 percent. Between the year 2000 and 2004, the national average came down to 54.4 percent of the total population. However, by the year 2010, the national poverty incidence went up again to 69.0 percent (NBS, 2012). These figures are quite disturbing.

Step 3 Connect step 1 and 2 using the term "in spite of".

Step 4 (statement 3): The Benefit of research by projecting the consequences of possible solution(s) as well.

If nothing is done now, the National Poverty level may escalate further thereby worsening the living conditions of the Nigerian people. The need, therefore, arises to examine the implementation of the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP).

One of the possible research questions that can originate from the example 1 above may be: To what extent is poor programme implementation responsible for the rising poverty in Nigeria? The objective can be presented as - to examine if poor programme implementation is responsible for

the rising poverty in Nigeria and the hypothesis will be – they is no link between poor programme implementation and the rising poverty in Nigeria.

Sample 2

Topic: Motivational System and Employees' Productivity in Public Universities.

Step 1 (statement 1): Stating the goal or desired state of a given situation or phenomenon.

In order to accomplish their missions, public universities in Nigeria need motivated workforces. Motivational system in this regard include good salary packages for all cadre of staff, allowances paid as at when due, a well structured and implemented promotion system and a conducive working environment.

Step 2 (statement 2): The reality of the situation as at present.

However, there are frequent and severe disciplinary actions, absenteeism as well as various forms of unrest in public universities in Nigeria which affect the accomplishment of the set missions (Apeh, 2000).¹ Studies reveal that both non-management and management staffs are not adequately motivated (Usman, 2001).²

Step 3 connect step 1 and 2 using the term “however”

Step 4 (Statement 3): The benefit of research by projecting the consequences of possible solution(s) as well.

Without effective motivational system (packages), the said vices are likely to continue and retard the achievement of the universities missions. Need arises to examine the public universities motivation system hence this research.

One of the possible research questions that may flow from the example 2 above is: To what extent is inadequate funding responsible for poor motivation packages for both non-management and management staff of public universities in Nigeria? The objective will be to determine if inadequate funding is responsible for poor motivation packages for both non-management and management staff of public universities. The hypothesis will be – they is no relationship between funding and poor motivational packages for both non-management and management staff of public universities

Conclusion

The paper examines the key issues in articulating statement of problem in a research undertaking. The paper concludes that the statement of problem is the ‘heart’ of any research endeavour because of its centrality. The successful outcome or otherwise of any research endeavour is determined by how well the research problem is defined. Using Bwisa’s four steps approach, the paper, therefore provided a hypothetical samples of well articulated statement of problem. However, scholarly opinions suggest that there is no ‘one best way’ to present a research problem. Whichever style one chooses, the problem must be well defined and as specific as possible.

Finally, students are advised that when asked to submit research topics, they should think of a research problem rather than a research topic. A research topic is perceived while research problem is felt. Students should endeavour to always submit a felt problem rather than a perceived problem in the form of topic.

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