

# **Conducting a Research for Achieving Professional Qualifications: Changing the World or Obtaining the Degree**

## **Abstract**

Opportunities for postgraduate education in the field of Library and Information Science (LIS) in Sri Lanka are extensive. A research component is a partial requirement of almost all of these postgraduate programs. There is a general understanding that a significant number of candidates find it difficult to complete their research component within the allocated time period. There are cases that a '6 months' research module has been dragged-on for one year while a 'one year research' module has been dragged-on for 2 years. Worse cases were also not rare. This is a very disappointing aspect when it comes to young professionals who are in the early stages of their career. This paper discusses about this dilemma with a point of view, where this can be eliminated or curtailed by a constructive intellectual dialogue that addresses the misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Although, this paper focuses on the Sri Lankan perspective, there are numerous evidences for the author to believe that the situation might be more or less similar in many other countries. Besides, this is not unique to the LIS field. Students of various other disciplines are also reported failing to accomplish their postgraduate qualifications on time due to the delay in submitting their dissertations.

Keywords: Conducting research studies, Library and Information Science education, Sri Lanka

## **Background**

The demand for postgraduate education in Library and Information Science (LIS) field in Sri Lanka is substantial. In recent years, the interest towards postgraduate education has been visibly increased among the Sri Lankan information professionals. A two years master's degree with one years research component is an essential requirement for confirmation in their posts as Assistant Librarians, attached to the National University System of Sri Lanka. The opportunities for acquiring a job or getting promoted in the current occupation are undoubtedly quite high if the candidate holds a postgraduate degree. As a result, there are a significant number of librarians who are seeking postgraduate qualifications either locally or internationally. Several local institutions namely; University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka Library Association, Faculty of Graduate Studies of University of Colombo and National Institute of Library and Information Science, are offering a series of well recognized undergraduate and postgraduate study programs and continuous professional development programs island-wide. In a nutshell, there is a group of enthusiastic candidates for LIS education and a wide-array of LIS study programs offered currently in Sri Lanka.

On one hand, the candidates are allowed the luxury of selecting a study program that best suits him/her, and on the other hand, the potential applicants are also allowed the luxury of properly being informed of the requirements of the study program before enrolling to a particular study program. Hence, it is expected that at least the majority of students would be able to complete the program within the allocated time period, since they are individuals already with sound educational background. However, there is a general understanding that a significant number of candidates are unable to complete their research component within the time allocated. In some cases 6 months research has been dragged-on for one year while one year research has been dragged-on for two years. Worse cases were also not rare. This delay in obtaining the postgraduate qualifications is retarding the career prospects of young librarians. It is advisable to encourage LIS researchers to carry out a systematic research to reveal the hidden problems and to propose practical solutions to this problem. However, there are several apparent bottlenecks in the process that could be easily eliminated through an intellectual dialogue. The objective of the paper is to discuss several such issues in a manner of initiating constructive discourse among the LIS students and the respective professionals.

### **Research topic OR area of interest**

**Issue:** In finding a research topic many students tend to explore all the options but they forget the very best option - the literature.

All the postgraduate students know that they have to conduct a research study as a partial fulfillment of the study program. Nevertheless, some of them wait until they finish the academic component and then expect someone to propose a topic. There are students who have spent over 2 to 3 months going round and round hoping that someone would dictate a topic for them. Teachers, supervisors and colleagues could be helpful but the researcher should understand that he/she is the one who should spend months or years on it. Hence, it is very important to select an area that holds a professional or personal interest of the researcher.

**Suggestions:** The prime goal of a research is to enrich the existing knowledge-base by contributing at least a small piece of original work. Hence, the very first step that the student

should take is to explore the literature based on an area of their interest. A researcher can start working on a study as soon as a research problem (a gap in the literature that is worthwhile to be filled) is identified. The title of the research can be finalized in a later stage.

### **Scope and the feasibility of the study**

**Issue:** Many students seem to be forgetting their limitations in terms of time, budget and skills when planning their research.

The feasibility and the scope of the study should be measured in terms of time, budget and skills. A research study that is going to be carried out as a partial fulfillment of a professional qualification is an individual venture that should be completed within a time period that has been defined by the rules of the study program. Besides, in most cases postgraduate research studies are self-financed. There were students that started working on research studies that needed a team of people with different skills and knowledge to finish by the stipulated time period. It is also unwise to select an area, particularly for a research that should complete within 6 months or one year time period, that needs approval or clearance from a third party to start collecting data, since there is no allowance of time for the period waiting ‘for approval’.

Hence, the students should be very careful in setting the boundaries of the study. It is very important for students to realize that mostly they work alone and it is costly to get the assistance from outside consultants.

**Suggestions:** It is advisable to select a study that would meet the requirements of the study program but simple enough to carry out without or with minimum assistance from consultants.

### **Research planning**

**Issue:** Most of the students are well aware of the importance of data but only a few of them understand the value of proper research planning.

The research component of the postgraduate program mainly aims at measuring the student’s ability in applying the research theories taught during the academic year. Therefore, the

methodology that was used to conduct the study would be evaluated very seriously by the examiners.

Researchers should select the most appropriate and feasible method to conduct the study after considering a series of research methods. In other words, the researcher should have a valid reason to select the particular method over the others.

Students seem to be always in a hurry to collect data. As a result, many students pay very little attention towards the essential steps of research planning. Designing a data collection tool is a multi-stepped process that consists of self-evaluation, supervisor's comments, pre-testing and a pilot study. The validity and the reliability of data collected depend a lot on the content and the design of the data collection tool. The structured questionnaire is a very popular and widely used tool among MLS postgraduate students. Most of the students do not take the designing of the questionnaire seriously and try to do it in one or two sittings. There had been instances that students used previously used questionnaires without making necessary adaptations or have used questionnaires designed from a set of questions that were taken from several different questionnaires or a series of questions that have been floating in their minds. Answering such questionnaires is not an easy task for the participant. Hence, the response rate would most probably be low. Besides, it is very difficult to analyze data collected using a carelessly designed tool and answering the research questions might be even more difficult. Those students who have realized their mistakes at the time of analyzing the data will have to go back and do rigorous changes to their research proposal.

Role of the participants is very crucial for the success of the social research. Hence, the participants have to be selected very carefully with their full consent. If necessary, ethical or legal clearances should be taken prior to implementation of the study. It is a duty of the researcher to inform all the participants about the nature of the research and explain clearly the role they need to play during the research process. Uniform instructions should be provided to each participant through written documents or verbally. If the instructions are delivered verbally it is advisable to prepare a script.

Since it is a testing process on how well the student has learnt the research methodology lessons, taught in the class, the students should try to upgrade and update their knowledge on research methods, techniques and tools by going through the previous notes and browsing recommended extra reading materials. However, none of the research methods or instruments is perfect; all of them have their own advantages and disadvantages. Hence, data collection tools should be designed very carefully by taking all the necessary precautionary measures to make sure that the tool is capable of collecting reliable and valid data that are easy to analyze and sufficient to answer the intended research questions. It is also vital to select the participants who would be able to give true and honest answers. The size and composition of the sample are also very important in this aspect.

**Suggestions:** Selecting the most appropriate techniques; designing accurate tools and finding cooperating participants etc. are usually a time consuming practices. However, the time spent on the research planning could be considered as a good investment on the success of the study since it is very costly if it has to be revised at a later stage.

## **Time management**

**Issue:** Sometimes students are either too slow or too fast while some students have started their postgraduate studies at a very bad timing.

Bad time management is one of the main problems out of the many reasons that students are unable to complete their research studies on time. Some students waste a lot of time on matters that are not very important or those can be finalized later or things that would gradually develop with the progress of the study. Once they realize the deadline is only a month or two away, they tend to collect what they have written and submit. Other, major drawbacks that retard the research process are inability of students to prioritize and identify the tasks that can be done simultaneously. Above all, most of the students do not know what would be their time wasters are and how to get rid of them. Besides, students frequently complain about their personal problems – family and health. Being an adult with numerous social obligations the students should be very careful about the time they enroll to a postgraduate program. Some students start their postgraduate studies at a time when there are many other important things to do in their

lives. Therefore, it is essential to discuss with the family and get their consent and blessing before seeking admission for a study program

**Suggestions:** Prepare a realistic time plan and make sure that you are progressing accordingly. If lapse are observed, immediately identify the reasons and try to eliminate them in a way that they do not cause further interferences. Then try to recover the lost time by allocating more time. Always be cautious about the time wasters.

### **Role of the supervisor**

**Issue:** Some students expect to be spoon fed by the supervisor, while some of them hardly meet their supervisors. Many students are slow to understand the role of the supervisor and the importance of maintaining a good relationship with the supervisor.

The supervisor is a person with sound background knowledge in the selected discipline as well as on research methods and theories. In addition, he/she, usually, has years of experience in conducting research and supervising research students. However, at the beginning, usually, the supervisor allows the student to work freely and intervene only at points that need specialized guidance. In other words, the student should explore by himself/herself, which is also a part of the learning process, and find his/her own way and report the progress to the supervisor.

Understanding the role of the supervisor and maintaining a good relationship with him/ her are very important factors for the successful completion of the study. Hence, the selection of the supervisor should be done very carefully after considering the factors such as the supervisor's interest towards the research area selected; years ahead for the retirement; opportunities for effective communication (i.e. if the supervisor is not living close by then the supervisor should be ready to communicate via e-mail, chat or telephone). Most these issues can be clarified by carrying out a face to face or online discussion with the prospective supervisor.

**Suggestions:** Meeting the supervisor face to face or at least online on regular basis and keep him/her informed about the progress of the study is very crucial. Besides, it is necessary for both parties to try to understand each other and be flexible, but the main responsibility of maintaining

a good relationship lies with the student. However, if the student finds it very difficult to work with the supervisor, the student has the privilege to change the supervisor. First of all the student should discuss with the supervisor and get his/her consent to do so. In most cases, the supervisor will understand the student's condition and may even help to identify a suitable person.

## **Data analysis**

**Issue:** Many students face difficulties in analyzing data. Usually, they spend a lot of money to hire a statistician since they think it is essential to apply complicated data analysis techniques. As a result, students present tables and figures that they do not know much about and produce very weak discussions on their findings.

Analyzing of data should always go on par with answering the research questions or testing the hypothesis and ultimately achieving the research objectives. Data analysis is not just a presentation of tables and figures, but rather a logical and descriptive discussion on findings generated by the research study. What is needed is to identify the most appropriate data analysis techniques to produce required results. It is absolutely acceptable to present results as totals, subtotals, mean values, standard deviation values etc., if the researcher is able to answer the research questions fully, using such values. However, researchers are allowed to get the assistance of a statistician. It is also useful to get the views of a consultant if the researcher does not have sufficient knowledge and skills on statistics. In such cases, the researcher should carry out an extensive discussion which helps the consultant to clearly understand the goals of the research and the nature of the data. Meanwhile it is also necessary for the researcher to be familiarized with the techniques that are going to be used and to be able to comprehensively explain the tables and figures that are used to present the findings.

**Suggestions:** What matters most is the appropriateness of the techniques to achieve the goals of the study. Data analysis chapter should be logically organized according to the research questions/ hypothesis with descriptive discussions. Arguments can be strengthened by comparing with the findings of previous research studies. Use of appropriate tables and figures to illustrate the result is very much necessary to enhance the understandability of the analysis.

## **Report writing**

**Issue:** In many cases there is a vast time gap between the period of data collection and submission of the dissertation for evaluation. When, finally, it is the time for the viva, the results are outdated and hold very little or no value.

Many students keep postponing the submission of the dissertation due to not completing the writing process. Insufficient knowledge in dissertation writing and the lack of proficiency in the working language are the main reasons for this delay in most of these cases. The researchers are allowed to get the assistance of a language editor, but the presentation, organization and conceptual and theoretical construction of the dissertation should be carried out by the researcher. The best way to learn and familiarize with dissertation writing styles is to refer to several properly designed and well presented dissertations. The comments of the colleagues would also be very helpful to enhance the quality and clarity of the dissertation. Therefore, students should try to get colleagues to read through their chapters as a form of ‘peer review’. Nevertheless, the supervisor is the person who is most conversant on dissertation writing and capable of adding values to presentation. Hence, students should allocate sufficient time to get the feedbacks from the supervisor and revise the chapters accordingly.

**Suggestions:** Producing a good dissertation is compulsory to obtain a research based degree. However, writing a dissertation is a long process that needs a lot of commitment and patience from the part of the researcher. Hence, the student should commence writing under the directions of the supervisor from the initial stages of the study and continue the writing throughout the research process. Submitting chapter by chapter (as soon as they satisfactorily completed) for supervisor’s evaluation could help to finalize the work quickly rather than waiting to bring all the chapters at once to the supervisor.

## **Concluding remarks**

It is the responsibility of both parties – i.e. supervisor and student – to take all the possible efforts to submit properly completed dissertation on time. In order to do that, precautions should be taken to prevent all the avoidable interruptions. For example, one of the very frequent problems is the loss of data due to computer failures. Preparing digital copies of the data periodically and



storing them in different formats – i.e. CD ROMs, pen drives, external hard disks, web boxes - is a good and a sound solution. Similarly, staying focused within the boundaries of the study throughout the process is also very important. There are times that students easily get out of track, particularly when they are deeply involved in the process of exploring literature. Frequently, discussing the progress of the study with the supervisor could help a lot to adjust the focus and to proceed further. Besides, researchers should understand the skills and competencies that are needed to carry out the study and should learn/improve them or should seek the possibilities of getting outside support. Further, researchers should identify the methods, tools and techniques that would help to accelerate the research process and writing of the dissertation. For example, use of a good reference management tool saves a lot of time by facilitating storing and retrieving of different literature components and generating of reference lists according to a chosen reference style. Usually, different institutions have different house styles for dissertations. It is important for the researcher to be familiar with the accepted reference style and the formatting styles and start applying them from the first draft. At last but not least, the researcher has the freedom to decide what to present at the dissertation and what not to present. In other words, it is not necessary to report everything in the dissertation, what is expected is a comprehensive, but simple and clear presentation of the study in the form of a dissertation designed according to the assigned house style of the institution.

Student also should keep in mind that no research is perfect or free of limitations. However, the student should be well aware of the drawbacks of his/her study and should be able to provide good reasons to defend his/her case. Above all, it is also very much important for students to bear in mind that what is necessary at this stage is to conduct a study to fulfill the requirement of the program. Later, once qualified, more opportunities would be opened for you to do something that could cause a real impact to the discipline and to the society.