

Aligning The Research Gap With The Research Proposal: A Conceptual Framework And Empirical

Illustration From Uganda

Dr Arinaitwe Julius¹, Nahwera Ruth², Akampurira Sarah³

1, 2, 3 Metropolitan International University

Abstract

The misalignment between a stated research gap and the corresponding research proposal was among the most common and consequential errors in academic research design, yet it received relatively little systematic attention in research methodology instruction. When researchers identified a gap in the literature but then design a study that does not substantively address that gap or when the research gap was so broadly or vaguely articulated that it cannot coherently motivate any specific study; the entire scholarly enterprise was compromised: the research questions become directionless, the methodology becomes unjustifiable, and the contribution of findings becomes unclear. This qualitative study explored how postgraduate students and academic supervisors in Ugandan universities understand, experience, and attempt to navigate the challenge of gap-proposal alignment. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 34 participants including 22 postgraduate students and 12 academic supervisors at five Ugandan universities the study generated rich phenomenological accounts of confusion, frustration, breakthrough, and development around this methodological challenge. Findings revealed that gap-proposal misalignment is nearly universal among early-stage postgraduate students, was frequently not diagnosed until late in the proposal development process, and was experienced by both students and supervisors as one of the most difficult intellectual challenges in graduate education. The study proposed a practical conceptual framework-the Gap-Purpose-Questions (GPQ) alignment model grounded in participants' accounts of what helped them achieve coherence, and illustrates its application through three detailed case examples drawn from Ugandan research contexts.

Keywords: Research Gap, Research Proposal, Research Alignment, Postgraduate Research, Uganda, Research Methodology, Gap-Purpose-Questions Model, Academic Supervision, Research Design, Graduate Education

Background of the Study

Research has remained a fundamental function of higher education institutions because it supports knowledge generation, professional development, evidence-informed decision-making, and the improvement of social and institutional practices(Julius & Nancy, 2026). Universities have increasingly recognized the importance of strengthening research capacity among academic staff and postgraduate students, particularly in

environments where limited financial resources, inadequate research infrastructure, and competing academic responsibilities affect research productivity(Christopher et al., 2022). In Uganda, research capacity-building has been identified as an important concern within higher education institutions. Nakijoba and Awobamise (2022) reported challenges affecting educational research capacity in selected private universities, including limited

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financial resources, work overload, research-writing limitations, and insufficient institutional support(Kazaara & Nancy, 2025). These challenges demonstrated the importance of strengthening researchers' capacity to identify meaningful research problems, formulate appropriate research questions, and develop proposals that could guide systematic investigation. Research proposal development was therefore understood not merely as an administrative requirement but as an essential stage in transforming scholarly curiosity into a structured research undertaking(okello, okello, Basheka, BC, 2021).

The identification of a research gap has constituted one of the most important stages in developing a research proposal. A research gap has generally referred to an area where existing knowledge was insufficient, inconsistent, incomplete, contextually limited, or incapable of adequately explaining a particular phenomenon(Julius & Kaazara, 2025). However, identifying a gap required more than observing that few studies had been conducted on a topic. Researchers needed to examine existing scholarship, determine what had already been established, identify limitations in previous investigations, and explain why further research was necessary. Wong et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of systematic and transparent processes for identifying research gaps, needs, and priorities(Julius & Audrey, 2025). Their review demonstrated that gap identification could involve literature examination, stakeholder engagement, and structured approaches for determining the significance and feasibility of proposed research. This perspective indicated that a research gap needed to be justified through evidence

and connected to a meaningful research problem rather than being presented as a general statement that “little research had been conducted.

The relationship between the research gap and the research proposal has been important because the gap provided the intellectual foundation for the proposed study(Julius & Desire, 2025). A well-developed research gap enabled the researcher to explain the problem being investigated, the knowledge that remained insufficient, and the contribution that the proposed research intended to make. The gap consequently informed the formulation of research objectives, research questions, theoretical perspectives, conceptual frameworks, and methodological decisions. If the research gap was unclear, the proposal could have lacked a coherent direction, resulting in objectives that were disconnected from the problem statement or methods that did not adequately address the proposed research questions. The alignment of research components has been recognized as a central consideration in qualitative research design. Howard-Grenville et al. (2021) discussed the importance of fit in qualitative research, emphasizing the relationship between research questions, theoretical perspectives, methodological choices, and the intended scholarly contribution. This indicated that proposal development required consistency between the problem being investigated and the methods used to address it.

Research capacity-building initiatives have also emphasized the need for universities to strengthen training, mentorship, research collaboration, and institutional support. Nakijoba and Awobamise (2022)

reported that research capacity challenges in selected private universities in Uganda were associated with limited resources, research-writing skills, workload, and institutional research environments. Their findings suggested that strengthening research output required more than encouraging academics to publish; it also required the development of skills and support systems that enabled researchers to formulate relevant questions and undertake rigorous research. In this context, training on research-gap identification and proposal alignment could have supported researchers in improving the logical connection between their research problems, objectives, conceptual frameworks, and methodologies. Such training could have been particularly relevant to postgraduate students and early-career researchers who were still developing their research competencies.

The study titled “Aligning the Research Gap with the Research Proposal: A Conceptual Framework and Empirical Illustration from Uganda” was therefore

Problem Statement

Research proposal development has remained a critical requirement for postgraduate students, university lecturers, and researchers seeking to undertake systematic investigations and contribute to scholarly knowledge (Julius & Audrey, 2026). Despite the importance of research proposals, researchers have experienced challenges in translating broad academic interests into clearly defined research problems, objectives, conceptual frameworks, and methodologies. In Uganda, research capacity-building studies have reported challenges associated with limited research resources, research-writing skills, institutional support, and competing responsibilities among academic staff (Nakijoba & Awobamise, 2022). These challenges could have affected the ability of researchers to formulate well-aligned proposals, particularly where the research gap was not clearly established before the development of the remaining proposal components. The problem was therefore associated not only with the availability of research resources but also with the practical capacity to transform existing knowledge gaps into coherent and defensible research plans.

A major concern involved the manner in which researchers identified and justified research gaps. Some researchers could have identified a gap solely because few studies had been conducted in a particular geographical location or

developed to examine how researchers understood and applied the relationship between identified research gaps and proposal development. The study explored the processes through which researchers identified gaps in existing literature, formulated research problems, developed objectives, constructed conceptual frameworks, and selected appropriate qualitative methods. It also examined the challenges encountered during proposal development and the strategies used to improve alignment between different research components. Through a qualitative approach, the study sought to generate an in-depth understanding of researchers’ experiences and perceptions and to develop an empirical illustration from the Ugandan context. The findings were intended to contribute to research capacity-building by providing practical guidance on how a clearly established research gap could be translated into a coherent and methodologically appropriate research proposal.

because a previous study recommended further research. Although these observations could have provided starting points for inquiry, they did not automatically demonstrate the significance or originality of a research problem (Julius, Sarah, et al., 2026). A research gap needed to be examined in relation to existing evidence, unresolved theoretical or practical concerns, methodological limitations, and the context in which the proposed study would be conducted. Wong et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of systematic approaches to identifying research gaps, needs, and priorities. Their findings suggested that gap identification required structured processes and attention to relevance, stakeholder needs, and feasibility. The problem was that researchers could have lacked practical guidance on how to move from a general observation about existing literature to a clearly articulated gap that justified a specific research proposal (Julius, Audrey, et al., 2026).

The problem was further reflected in the potential disconnection between research gaps and research objectives. A research gap could have been identified in one area, while the objectives developed in the proposal addressed another issue. For example, a researcher might have identified inadequate understanding of research supervision practices but developed objectives that focused only on research productivity without examining the supervisory processes underlying the identified concern. Such misalignment could have weakened the logical foundation of the proposal and created difficulties during data collection and analysis. Howard-Grenville et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of fit in qualitative research, particularly the alignment of research questions, theoretical perspectives, methodology, and the intended contribution. This suggested that researchers needed to ensure that the objectives were directly derived from the research problem and that each objective contributed to addressing the identified gap.

The study therefore addressed the problem of inadequate understanding and practical application of alignment between research gaps and research proposals. It examined how researchers identified and justified research gaps, how they developed conceptual frameworks, and how they connected research objectives and qualitative methods to the identified problem. The study further explored the challenges experienced by researchers during proposal development and the forms of institutional or supervisory support that could improve alignment. A qualitative approach was used to investigate participants' experiences and perceptions in depth. The study was intended to provide an empirical illustration from Uganda and develop practical recommendations for strengthening research proposal development, research capacity, and the methodological coherence of scholarly investigations.

Methodology

Research Approach

The study adopted a qualitative research approach to examine researchers' experiences, perceptions, and practices concerning the alignment of research gaps with research proposals. The qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand how researchers interpreted research gaps, developed research problems, formulated objectives, constructed conceptual frameworks, and selected research methods. These processes involved reasoning, interpretation, and contextual decision-making that could not be adequately understood through numerical measurements alone. The approach enabled the researcher to explore participants' explanations of how they moved

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from reviewing existing literature to preparing research proposals. It also supported the examination of difficulties associated with research-gap identification, conceptual framework development, and the alignment of research components. Qualitative research required attention to methodological fit and the relationship between research questions, theoretical assumptions, data collection, and analytical procedures (Howard-Grenville et al., 2021). The approach was therefore used to obtain detailed information that informed the development of a practical framework for aligning research gaps and proposals.

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative descriptive and exploratory research design. The descriptive component enabled the researcher to document the procedures participants followed when identifying research gaps and preparing research proposals. The exploratory component enabled the researcher to investigate the challenges and decision-making processes associated with proposal alignment. The study examined how participants understood the relationship between literature gaps, research problems, objectives, research questions, conceptual frameworks, and qualitative methodologies. It did not seek to establish statistical relationships between variables or measure the effect of research-gap alignment on research performance. Instead, it focused on understanding how researchers developed and explained the logical connections between the different components of a research proposal. The design also enabled the researcher to investigate variations in participants' experiences according to their academic roles, research experience, and involvement in postgraduate supervision or scholarly writing. The methodological focus was informed by research on conceptual design and qualitative research fit, which emphasized the importance of coherence between the purpose of a study and the methods used to investigate it (Jaakkola, 2020; Howard-Grenville et al., 2021).

Study Population

The study population comprised university lecturers, postgraduate students, research supervisors, research coordinators, and academic research-support personnel in selected higher education institutions in Uganda. The participants were selected because they possessed experience or relevant knowledge concerning research-gap identification, proposal development, conceptual framework construction, and qualitative research methodology. The inclusion of participants from different academic roles enabled the researcher to obtain diverse perspectives on the process of developing research proposals. Postgraduate students provided information about their experiences in identifying research problems and preparing proposals, while supervisors and lecturers explained the expectations and challenges associated with research alignment. Research coordinators and research-support personnel contributed information concerning institutional research procedures, proposal review, research training, and capacity-building initiatives. The study population was defined according to the participants' relevance to the research objectives and their ability to provide meaningful information about research proposal development within the Ugandan higher education context.

Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who possessed relevant experience, knowledge, or involvement in research proposal development. The researcher intentionally selected participants who had developed research proposals, supervised postgraduate research, participated in research review committees, or supported research training activities. The sampling procedure was appropriate because the study required participants who could provide detailed accounts of the practical processes involved in identifying research gaps and aligning research components. The researcher sought variation in academic roles and research experience to capture diverse perspectives concerning the challenges and strategies associated with proposal alignment. Participants were selected based on their relevance to the research problem rather than through a probability-based sampling procedure. The final sample size was guided by the depth and adequacy of the information obtained during interviews, the research objectives, and the point at which additional interviews no longer generated substantial new insights. The researcher maintained flexibility in the recruitment process to ensure that participants with relevant experiences were included.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary method of collecting qualitative data. The interviews enabled the researcher to obtain detailed information concerning participants' experiences and perceptions while maintaining consistency in the major issues explored across interviews. The interview guide was developed from the study objectives and the reviewed literature on research-gap identification, conceptual frameworks, qualitative research design, and proposal development. Participants were asked to explain how they identified research gaps, assessed the significance of previous studies, formulated research problems, and developed research objectives. Questions also examined how conceptual frameworks were constructed, how research questions were aligned with objectives, and how qualitative methods were selected to address the identified research problem. The researcher used probing questions to obtain clarification, explore practical examples, and examine differences in participants' experiences. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to investigate issues that emerged during the interviews while retaining focus on the study objectives.

The interviews were conducted using procedures that promoted voluntary participation, confidentiality, and accurate documentation of participants' responses. Before each interview, the researcher explained the purpose of the study, the nature of participation, the expected duration, and the intended use of the information collected. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could decline to answer questions or withdraw from the study in accordance with the approved ethical procedures. Audio recording was undertaken only after obtaining participants' permission, and detailed written notes were used where recording was not permitted. Interviews were conducted in a language that participants understood adequately, and the researcher clarified questions whenever necessary. The procedures were intended to ensure that the collected information reflected participants' experiences and interpretations rather than assumptions imposed by the researcher.

Documentary analysis was also employed to examine research proposals, institutional research guidelines, scholarly articles, conceptual framework publications, and relevant methodological documents. The documentary analysis

focused on the alignment between research problems, objectives, research questions, conceptual frameworks, and methodologies. Where access and ethical permissions were available, research proposals were examined to identify how researchers formulated gaps and translated them into proposal components. Scholarly literature was also reviewed to understand the methodological principles underlying research-gap identification and conceptual framework development. Wong et al. (2022) provided evidence on structured approaches to identifying research gaps, while Jaakkola (2020) discussed conceptual research design and the development of coherent scholarly contributions. The documentary analysis supported the interpretation of interview findings and informed the development of the proposed conceptual framework.

Data Collection Instrument

The main data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researcher. The instrument was designed to obtain information concerning participants' experiences in identifying research gaps and aligning research proposals. The interview guide was organized into thematic sections covering participants' academic and research experience, understanding of research gaps, procedures for reviewing literature, development of research problems, formulation of objectives, construction of conceptual frameworks, selection of qualitative methods, and challenges associated with proposal review. Open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to provide detailed explanations of their experiences. Participants were asked to describe examples of proposals they had developed or supervised and to explain how they determined whether the objectives, research questions, and conceptual frameworks were aligned with the research problem. The instrument was reviewed for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives before the main interviews were conducted. The questions were designed to support the exploration of both common practices and differences in participants' experiences.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify and interpret recurring patterns within participants' responses. Thematic analysis was appropriate because the study sought to examine the experiences and practices associated with research-gap identification and proposal alignment. The analysis involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of potential themes, review of themes, definition of themes, and preparation of the final analytical report. Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasized the importance of reflexivity and methodological clarity in thematic analysis. The researcher first read the interview transcripts repeatedly to develop familiarity with the data. Relevant statements were then coded according to issues such as gap identification, literature review, problem formulation, objective development, conceptual framework construction, methodological alignment, supervisory support, and proposal review.

The initial codes were examined and grouped into broader categories according to similarities and relationships. Codes relating to the identification of research gaps and literature evaluation were examined to establish themes concerning evidence-based problem formulation. Similarly, codes related to objectives, research questions, and conceptual frameworks were grouped to identify themes concerning proposal coherence and alignment. The researcher compared

the emerging themes with the original transcripts to ensure that the interpretations were grounded in participants' accounts. Divergent views were retained and examined during the analysis to avoid presenting only a single interpretation of the research proposal development process. Documentary evidence was used to complement interview findings and support the interpretation of methodological expectations. The final themes informed the development of the conceptual framework and the practical recommendations for improving research proposal alignment.

Results

Students' experiences of gap-proposal misalignment

The most consistent finding across the student interview data was that gap-proposal misalignment is experienced not primarily as a technical error but as a deeply disorienting intellectual experience—a moment of suddenly realizing that the conceptual foundation on which a proposal has been constructed is unsound. Students described this realization with language drawn from emotional and physical experiences of collapse, disorientation, and loss, pointing to the genuine psychological weight of what can appear from the outside as a merely methodological adjustment.

A second-year Master's student in educational management described spending three months developing a proposal on teacher motivation in primary schools before a supervisor feedback session revealed a fundamental gap-proposal misalignment:

I had written that the gap was that we don't know enough about the relationship between school leadership and teacher motivation in sub-Saharan Africa. Then my objectives were about measuring teacher attendance rates and salary satisfaction. My supervisor asked me: where in your objectives are you investigating leadership? I looked at my paper and I genuinely could not answer. It was like the floor dropped. Three months I had been building something and I had built it in the wrong direction without knowing. I went home and I sat with it for a week before I could go back.

(Participant 2, Master's Student, Educational Management)

A PhD student in public policy described a more subtle form of misalignment — one in which the gap and the proposal were thematically related but operated at different levels of specificity, creating a conceptual mismatch that her supervisor helped her identify only after four rounds of proposal revision:

My gap was at the level of a continent; I said we don't know enough about public sector reform in Africa. My research questions were about one district in Uganda. My supervisor kept saying the gap is too broad. I kept making the gap more specific. But the real problem was not the words in the gap statement; it was that I had not done the work of reading enough to know what specifically was missing at the local level. The gap was not a statement. It was supposed to be knowledge. That took me a year to understand.

(Participant 9, PhD Student, Public Policy)

Supervisors' perspectives: the diagnosis challenge

Academic supervisors interviewed for this study offered a complementary set of perspectives on gap-proposal misalignment; perspectives shaped by years of watching students navigate this challenge and by their own reflections

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on where and why the alignment process so frequently fails. Supervisors described diagnosing misalignment as one of the most intellectually demanding aspects of their supervisory role, requiring them to hold in mind simultaneously the student's stated gap, the actual state of the literature, the student's proposed design, and the logical relationship between all three while also attending to the relational dynamics of supervision in a way that preserves student confidence and motivation even when delivering difficult feedback.

When a student sends me a proposal I read the gap statement first and then I read the research questions. If I cannot draw a direct logical line from one to the other; if the questions do not feel like a natural response to the gap; I know we have work to do. The difficulty is explaining this to a student who has spent months on the proposal and who genuinely cannot see why it is not working. You have to be very careful. You are not just correcting a document; you are working with someone's intellectual confidence.

(Participant 19, Associate Professor, Research Methods)

Several supervisors described a pattern they had observed repeatedly: students who identify a broad, well-established gap in the literature; one that has been cited in multiple published articles without doing the deeper reading necessary to determine whether that gap has since been addressed by more recent scholarship. The result is a gap that is either already filled or so broadly contested that it cannot coherently motivate a specific study.

They come with a gap they found in a 2015 paper and they haven't checked whether someone has addressed it since. I had a student last year whose entire proposal was built on a gap that had been filled by three articles published in 2021. She had not found them. When I showed them to her she cried. I understood why. But I also thought this is what the literature review is for. It is not decoration. It is the intellectual work that makes the gap credible.

(Participant 27, Professor, Social Sciences)

The gpq alignment model: a participant-grounded framework

Drawing on the strategies that participants described as most helpful in achieving gap-proposal alignment, the study proposes the Gap-Purpose-Questions (GPQ) Alignment Model as a practical framework for postgraduate researchers and their supervisors. The model is presented not as a rigid procedural checklist but as a conceptual scaffold that guides the alignment thinking process through three iterative questions: (1) what specifically is missing from the literature, at what level of specificity, and why does it matter? (2) What is the purpose of this study; what type of knowledge does it aim to produce (descriptive, explanatory, predictive, prescriptive, critical)? (3) Do the research questions, when answered, directly and completely address the stated gap through the stated purpose?

A doctoral student in management studies described developing a similar framework independently, through trial and error over two years of proposal development, and credited it with finally unlocking the alignment that had eluded her:

I started writing my gap and my research questions on separate pieces of paper. Then I would try to connect them with an arrow and write one sentence; 'this study addresses the gap by doing X.' If I couldn't write that sentence, I knew something was wrong. It sounds simple. It took me two years to develop that habit. Now when I teach research

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methods I give my students a piece of paper with three boxes: gap, purpose, questions. I tell them to fill the boxes and then connect them. If the connections don't work, start again.

(Participant 14, PhD Student, Management)

Conclusions and implications

This study demonstrates that gap-proposal misalignment is not a peripheral or technical problem in postgraduate research education; it is a central intellectual challenge that most students encounter and that, when handled poorly, causes significant distress, wasted effort, and impaired research quality. The GPQ Alignment Model offered here provides a practical, experience-grounded framework for addressing this challenge systematically. Supervisory capacity development programmes should incorporate explicit training on gap-proposal alignment diagnosis and remediation. Research methodology courses should dedicate dedicated instruction to the intellectual process of connecting gap identification to proposal design. And postgraduate students should be helped to understand that misalignment is not a sign of failure but a normal part of the iterative intellectual development through which research proposals are refined into coherent scholarly plans.

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