



Consistently Securing Research Funding in Today's Competitive World: Is it Submitting Perfect or Strategic Proposals?

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Abstract: *This study explores whether it is perfect or strategic proposals that influence consistently securing research funding among researchers in Tanzania. Getting research funding consistently make or break work of the researchers in developing countries like Tanzania. Some of the given researchers dedicate their energies into writing and submitting either perfect or strategic proposals for funding. However, there is scarce empirical evidence on what really matters between perfect and strategic proposals for consistently securing research funding from Tanzanian context. Therefore, this study addresses two questions: Which type of proposal that consistently secure research funding between perfect and strategic proposals in Tanzania? What are the reasons of consistently securing research funding between perfect and strategic proposals in Tanzania? The questions given were addressed by using interpretivism research philosophy with qualitative approach and exploratory research design. The data was collected through documentary review and in-depth interview with 18 purposively sampled researchers involved in research proposal development, submission, or evaluation. The data collected were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that consistently research funding is not always influenced by perfect academic proposals but the strategic proposals in today's competitive world. This is because the perfect proposals have hidden costs of academic perfection while the strategic proposals have good enough revolution and success. Therefore, the Tanzanian researchers with limited resources can be game changers through consistently securing research funding by submitting strategic proposals rather than perfect academic proposals.*

Keywords: *Consistently securing, research funding, perfect proposal, strategic proposal, today's competitive world*

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1. Introduction

Consistently access and securing research funding access is a central pillar for sustainable scientific development and innovation in today's competitive world (Bozeman & Youtie, 2020). Reliable access to research funding is the lifeblood of a strong research culture in Tanzania and other developing nations shaping not only productivity but also

the relevance of research to national development goals (Fussy, 2024). When researchers consistently secure funding, they gain the opportunity to train, collaborate, and focus on their work without the constant worry of interrupted projects (Kadikilo, 2024; World Bank, 2021). Institutions also benefit, as steady financial support allows them to build modern labs, improve data systems, and strengthen management structures that keep research

aligned with the country's priorities (Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology [COSTECH], 2021; World Bank, 2021). In addition, stable funding creates space for evidence-based solutions in areas such as health, agriculture, education, and climate resilience that directly touch people's lives (COSTECH, 2021; African Development Bank, 2025; UNESCO, 2024). It also helps retain talented scholars, promotes fairness in opportunities for early-career and women researchers, and attracts global collaborations that bring in extra resources (United Kingdom Government, 2020; UNESCO, 2024).

Although the research funding is very beneficial, securing it has been very competitive due to the current nature of today's competitive world. In other words, in today's intensely competitive research funding environment, scientists must operate with both precision and practicality. The sheer volume of high-quality applications means that even excellent ideas can struggle to stand out, making alignment with funder priorities and demonstrable impact just as critical as scientific merit (Behfar, Shekhtman, & Crowcroft, 2024; Barnett, 2024). At the same time, institutional support such as streamlined grant offices, effective pre-award planning, and strong partnerships has emerged as a key differentiator in successful funding outcomes (Sun, Ma, von Graevenitz, & Latora, 2023). Funding agencies increasingly favour proposals that not only articulate bold ideas but also show clear pathways for uptake and collaboration, elevating strategy and ecosystem readiness above immaculate proposal-writing alone. In this context, researchers and institutions must pivot from creating perfect submissions toward cultivating adaptive, responsive strategies recognizing when a high-quality proposal is "good enough" and submitting it rather than striving endlessly for perfection.

Consistently securing research funding relies on a combination of factors such as strategic alignment, strong partnerships, responsiveness, and institutional support (Dine *et al.*, 2024; Taylor *et al.*, 2023). Researchers whose proposals reflect national priorities such as food security, climate resilience, innovation, and human capital development tend to be more competitive (COSTECH, 2023). Building networks and collaborations, especially cross-disciplinary or international partnerships, also strengthens proposals by demonstrating broader impact and implementation capacity, as seen in initiatives under Science Granting Councils Initiative (SGCI) and European Union (EU)-funded programmes (The Citizen, 2025). Timing and agility matter too; successful applicants stay alert to calls, participate in webinars, and adjust their proposals to meet emerging themes, a practice encouraged through COSTECH's Higher Education for Economic Transformation (HEET Project, 2025; The Citizen, 2025). Finally, institutional support and mentorship from research offices, proposal review systems, and guidance

programmes help researchers improve the quality and relevance of their applications, as evidenced in O.R. Tambo Africa Research Chairs Initiative (ORTARChI) collaborations with South Africa's National Research Foundation [NRF] (ORTARChI/NRF, 2023; HEET Project, 2025). Together, the aforementioned factors create a supportive ecosystem that not only increases the chances of funding success but also builds capacity for Tanzanian researchers to compete and thrive on regional and global stages. All such influencing factors are always reflected in submitting proposals for consistently securing research funding in today's competitive world. The proposals can be either perfect or strategic proposals.

A perfect proposal is a well-crafted research proposal which is often characterised by its clear and compelling language, robust methodology, strong theoretical foundation, and adherence to structural and formatting guidelines (Porter, 2007). Such proposals typically meet or exceed the technical and academic standards expected by funding bodies (Porter, 2007). However, several studies caution that high technical quality alone is insufficient if the proposal does not explicitly align with the funder's strategic priorities (Gaughan & Bozeman, 2016). This alignment ensures that the proposed research addresses the funder's goals and priorities, increasing the likelihood of securing funding. In other words, securing reliable research funding is not just about sustaining academic work, it is about ensuring that the research proposal continues to inform policy, drive innovation, and strengthen resilience in the face of future challenges (Fussy, 2024; African Development Bank, 2025).

Therefore, researchers must not only focus on the technical aspects of their proposals but also ensure that their research aligns with the strategic priorities of potential funders. Evidence from various contexts indicates that while perfection is desirable, it is not sufficient to ensure funding success (Porter, 2007; Gaughan & Bozeman, 2016). Funders increasingly favour proposals that demonstrate impact, feasibility, and alignment with their strategic priorities over those that are overly technical but misaligned (Nicholson & Bennett, 2021).

On the other hand, a "strategic" research proposal is a proposal that prioritizes alignment with the mission, values, and interests of the funding organization (Nicholson & Bennett, 2021). This proposal often responds directly to the language of the call for applications and may emphasize impact, relevance, feasibility, and partnerships (Nguyen, Kebede, & Harle, 2021). Strategic proposals may contain minor imperfections but are tailored to resonate with funders' evaluation criteria (Mackay & Munro, 2022). The concept of "strategic imperfection" is gaining traction, suggesting that proposals that are slightly imperfect yet responsive and well-aligned with funders' priorities can

outperform technically perfect but misaligned submissions (Mackay & Munro, 2022).

In resource-constrained environments like Tanzania, researchers who possess a clear understanding of development needs and donor behaviour are better positioned to secure funding consistently (Brown *et al.*, 2022; COSTECH, 2023). Securing research funding in Tanzania and other developing countries is a complex challenge that goes far beyond submitting technically flawless proposals (Kadikilo, 2024). While grammatical precision, methodological rigour, and polished formatting are important, these qualities alone do not guarantee success (Porter, 2007). Increasingly, funders are looking for proposals that align strategically with their organizational goals, demonstrate relevance and feasibility, and respond effectively to thematic calls, rather than proposals that are perfect in technical detail but misaligned with priorities (Gaughan & Bozeman, 2016; Nicholson & Bennett, 2021).

Regardless of what funders look for in submitted proposals, researchers in resource-constrained environments like Tanzania face additional hurdles including limited institutional support, heavy workloads, and fragmented research policies, which can make it difficult to produce competitive proposals (Kadikilo, 2024). Moreover, the highly competitive international funding landscape amplifies these challenges, making it crucial for researchers to understand both development needs and donor priorities to position their work effectively (Brown *et al.*, 2022; COSTECH, 2023).

Therefore, this study explores whether it is perfect or strategic proposals that influence consistently securing research funding among researchers in Tanzania. It specifically addresses two questions: *Which type of proposal consistently secures research funding between perfect and strategic proposals in Tanzania? What are the reasons for consistently securing research funding between perfect and strategic proposals in Tanzania?* Addressing such questions seek to explore the relative importance of technical perfection versus strategic alignment in securing research funding, providing insights into how researchers can increase their chances of success in today's competitive environment (Hegde & Sampat, 2019; Mackay & Munro, 2022; Nguyen, Kebede, & Harle, 2021).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Review

As stated earlier, securing research funding today is rarely just about producing a flawless academic proposal (Kadikilo, 2024). Instead, a mix of organisational and

behavioural theories helps explain why proposals that are strategically aligned with funders' priorities often succeed where "perfect" ones fall short. In other words, securing research funding in today's highly competitive landscape is rarely a straightforward process, and no single theory can fully explain why some proposals succeed while others fail. Being that the case, this study draws on multiple perspectives from five key theories. These theories are Resource Dependence Theory, Signalling Theory, Institutional Theory, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, and Social Capital Theory to frame this discussion. By combining these lenses, the study offers a comprehensive framework that reflects the real-world dynamics of research funding. Specifically, the theories show how strategy, communication, institutional support, and relationships work together to determine which proposals succeed, and provide valuable insights for researchers, institutions, funders, and policymakers alike.

2.2 Resource Dependence Theory (RDT)

Back in the late 1970s, Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) argued that organisations depend on outside resources, and because of that, they adapt their behaviour to secure those resources. In the case of research funding, both institutions and individual researchers rely heavily on external grants. This dependence pushes them to design proposals that fit with donor expectations, rather than chasing academic perfection for its own sake. More recent studies (Nicholson & Bennett, 2021) confirm that proposals framed strategically around funder priorities tend to do better than those that are academically polished but less aligned. Generally, RDT helps to understand why researchers adapt their proposals to meet the demands of external funders.

2.3 Signaling Theory

Michael Spence (1973) first used Signaling Theory to explain how job seekers show their worth to employers. The same logic applies to research proposals: funders cannot directly see the future quality of a project, so researchers send signals like strong collaborations, clear relevance to current priorities, or evidence of past success to demonstrate reliability. O'Kane *et al.* (2022) found that funding bodies respond more positively to these clear and relevant signals than to overly dense technical detail. In practice, this means a strategically crafted proposal often communicates value more effectively than a "perfect" but complicated one. By and large, Signalling Theory shows how proposals communicate their value when funders cannot directly assess the project.

2.4 Institutional Theory

Meyer and Rowan (1977), followed by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), show that organisations often adopt certain practices to fit into wider institutional expectations. In research, this means individual researchers and institutions adapt to the pressures of donors, government policies, and international norms. Institutions respond by creating research support offices and mentorship programmes, which encourage proposals that align with funders' requirements (Luescher & Klemenčič, 2020). This theory helps explain why strategic proposals are often prioritised: they satisfy the external rules of the game. Overall, Institutional Theory highlights the influence of organizational norms, mentorship, and research offices in guiding researchers toward funder-aligned strategies.

2.5 Dynamic Capabilities Theory

According to Teece, Pisano, and Shuen (1997), organisations succeed by developing “dynamic capabilities” the ability to spot opportunities, move quickly, and reorganise resources as needed. For researchers, this agility translates into monitoring funding calls, attending funder briefings, and making fast revisions based on reviewer feedback. Mackay and Munro (2022) note that, those individual researchers and institutions who adapt that agility tend to secure more research grants. In today's competitive world, being flexible and responsive often outweighs submitting a technically “perfect” proposal that arrives late or fails to address feedback. Largely, Dynamic Capabilities Theory captures the importance of agility on how timely and responsive actions can make the difference between success and rejection for the submitted proposals.

2.6 Social Capital Theory

Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and James Coleman (1988) both highlighted the value of networks, trust, and relationships in gaining access to resources. For researchers, social capital is built through mentors, collaborators, and institutional research offices. These connections provide technical feedback, link proposals to the right funders, and boost the credibility of the application (Manzoor, Wei, & Asif, 2020). In short, strong networks increase the chances that even a “good enough” proposal will get serious consideration. On the whole, the Social Capital Theory emphasizes the role of networks, collaborations, and institutional support in turning ideas into fundable projects.

Empirical Framework

Research from developed countries emphasises that successful grant acquisition is rarely the product of a single “perfect” proposal; rather, it reflects strategic alignment between the research idea and the funder's priorities, sustained institutional support, and deliberate partnership-building (Scholten *et al.*, 2021). Comparative policy analyses and funding-systems reviews show that, elite universities combine institutional block funding (to seed strategic priorities) with competitive grant writing supported by dedicated research offices, grant strategists, and long-term relationship management with funders' practices that consistently increase win rates (PwC & Russell Group/Wellcome analysis, 2025). Empirical studies from R&D organisations also highlight that proactive strategies such as horizon-scanning for calls, aligning proposals to strategic institutional priorities, and embedding clear impact pathways are stronger predictors of success than narrowly polishing technical writing alone (Ferrús-Pérez, 2024). These findings underline that proposal quality matters, but that quality is embedded within broader strategic and institutional practices.

In developing-country contexts, scholars emphasise that structural constraints (limited institutional capacity, weak research management offices, and fragmented national funding systems) reduce the payoff from technically strong proposals unless accompanied by strategic institutional supports (Kadikilo, Nayak & Sahay, 2025). Case studies and policy reviews from several developing countries demonstrate that institutions with targeted capacity-building—grant teams, pre-award support, seed funds for proof-of-concept work, and active international partnerships secure more external funding than institutions relying solely on individual investigators' proposal writing skills (World Bank, 2019; African Technology Policy Studies Network [ATPS], 2020; Science Granting Councils Initiative, 2020; Fleming, 2024). Moreover, strategic partnerships (co-applicants from higher-capacity institutions, south-north consortia) and responsiveness to donor priorities (co-created agendas, evidence of sustainability) significantly improve competitiveness for international awards (Ferrús-Pérez, 2024; Funds for NGOs, 2023). The clear implication is that “perfect” prose without strategic fit and institutional scaffolding is unlikely to be sufficient in resource-constrained environments.

Literature on Sub-Saharan Africa points to a nuanced picture in which both proposal quality and strategic positioning matter, but institutional and national ecosystems shape which factor dominates. Multi-stakeholder reviews and programme evaluations, including those conducted by the Science Granting Councils Initiative (SGCI), the Regional Scholarship and Innovation

Fund (RSIF), and World Bank supported initiatives, consistently highlight that capacity gaps such as insufficient pre-award support, limited pilot data, and weak financial management can undermine grant success even when the intellectual quality of proposals is high (Science Granting Councils Initiative, 2024; RSIF, 2020; World Bank, 2022). Conversely, programmes that deliberately invested in strengthening research management systems, fostering co-creation of proposals with partners, and aligning research projects with national priorities reported higher funding leverage and more sustainable outcomes (RSIF, 2021; Science Granting Councils Initiative, 2025; World Bank, 2019). Importantly, funders now increasingly prioritize proposals that demonstrate clear pathways to impact, strong local partnerships, and concrete capacity-strengthening elements attributes that depend more on institutional strategy than on individual proposal-writing skills alone (African Technology Policy Studies [ATPS], 2020; RSIF, 2020; World Bank, 2022).

In Tanzania, policy frameworks and recent evaluations emphasize the importance of strategic alignment and institutional readiness as prerequisites for competitive research funding. Initiatives such as COSTECH's National Research Priorities, the Higher Education for Economic Transformation (HEET) project, and the National Framework for Advancement of Science, Technology and Innovation (NFAST) encourage researchers to align proposals with national development goals, strengthen university–industry linkages, and build institutional capacity for managing grants effectively (COSTECH, 2023; MoEST, 2022; World Bank, 2021). Analyses of the Tanzanian higher-education funding landscape indicate that researchers who actively engage with national priorities, develop inter-institutional and international partnerships, and leverage institutional supports such as research offices, seed grants, and compliance systems tend to perform better in competitive calls. By contrast, researchers who rely solely on individually polished proposals often face challenges navigating administrative and financial requirements, limiting their funding success despite strong scientific ideas (COSTECH, 2023; MoEST, 2022).

Across both developed and developing contexts, the evidence converges on a single point: technically strong proposals are necessary but not sufficient for securing funding. Developed-country systems demonstrate how institutional strategies, seed funding, and dedicated pre-award support can institutionalize success, while evidence from African programmes confirms that strategic partnerships, alignment with national priorities, and robust institutional systems materially improve funding outcomes (Science Granting Councils Initiative, 2025; World Bank, 2022). In Tanzania, the ongoing policy shift toward national prioritization and institutional capacity building as

exemplified by HEET, COSTECH, and NFAST frameworks signals a deliberate move to place strategy and institutional readiness at the heart of funding success. For researchers and institutions alike, the practical implication is clear: pairing proposal-level excellence with deliberate strategic actions such as developing partnerships, strengthening institutional grant infrastructures, and aligning research with national and funder priorities is essential for consistently securing funding in today's competitive environment.

3. Methodology

This study is guided by an interpretivist research philosophy. The philosophy facilitated the understanding of researchers' experiences from their perspective on involvement in fundable research. It uncovered researchers' reasoning, experiences, and strategies rather than producing generalized or purely numerical results regarding consistently securing research funding in competitive landscape. It likewise demonstrated meanings that researchers attach to their practices in developing, submitting, reviewing or evaluating proposals for securing research funding. In fact, it provided a rich, context-driven understanding of what drives the researchers for funding success.

Furthermore, this study used a qualitative approach. This approach was used to explore researchers' experiences in depth concerning consistently securing research funding. It also allowed us to capture complex and nuanced insights about consistent securing research funding, which could not be obtained by using quantitative approach. It made the researchers share their deep insights with full picture of how perfect or strategic proposals function in consistently securing research funding.

Moreover, this study used an exploratory research design. The design offered flexibility of discovering patterns, emerging trends, and unexpected insights related to the effectiveness of perfect and strategic proposals in consistently securing research funding. It correspondingly helped to note new themes and ideas emerging during data collection about securing funding.

The study was conducted in six regions of Tanzania. These regions are Arusha, Dar es Salaam, Dodoma, Mbeya, Morogoro and Mwanza. These regions are leading in having researchers working in universities, research institutes, and government research offices in Tanzania. The given institutions have researchers who are actively involved in preparing, submitting, or evaluating research proposals for consistently securing research funding. Their involvement became an opportunity for provision of comprehensive view on whether is perfect or strategic

proposal that works out in consistently securing research funding.

The population of this study was researchers, who are experienced in preparing, submitting, or reviewing research proposals. Based on saturation criterion, this study used a sample of 18 researchers, who were purposively chosen. The technique ensured that chosen researchers' participants had enough experience and pertinent knowledge of providing in-depth insights on consistently securing research funding. In the selection of such researchers, the researcher ensured that the selected participants were representative i.e. a mix of disciplines, institutions, and experience levels. Those selection criteria allowed the researcher to obtain diverse perspectives on whether is perfect or strategic proposal works out in consistently securing research funding. Generally, the chosen researchers had consistent success in securing research grants within the past five years (track record of research funding), they are directly involved in research proposal development, submission, or evaluation (role and involvement in proposal writing); they are drawn from public Tanzanian academic and research institutions with active research engagement (institutional affiliation); they had diversity in career stage in order to capture different perspectives on strategic against perfect proposal writing across experience levels; and they had willingness to participate and had provided informed consent to share their experiences in depth.

The documentary review and in-depth interviews were used to collect data. Through documentary review, some accessible research proposals, funding calls, and institutional reports were reviewed. These documents provided context, patterns and common characteristics of successful or unsuccessful proposals in securing research funding. On the other hand, in-depth interviews allowed participant researchers to narrate their detailed experiences, strategies, and perceptions (rich qualitative data) concerning whether is perfect or strategic proposal works out in consistently securing research funding. Through this instrument, some follow-up questions were used to clarify responses and uncover implicit knowledge about securing research funding. Generally, both used instruments provided exhaustive understanding of the consistently securing research funding in today's competitive world, by either submitting perfect or strategic proposal. The combination of documentary review and in-depth interviews strengthened validity of this study i.e. ensured methodological triangulation and findings' cross-verification. In addition, the interviewees engaged in member checking by reviewing summaries of their interviews i.e. whether their input views were accurately captured by this study's researcher. On the other hand, reliability was done through a clear audit trail, consistent coding procedures, and systematic documentation of all

research activities. The given procedures ensured the credibility, dependability, and replicability of the findings in this study.

The data collected were analysed using thematic analysis. The method was performed by following procedures such as familiarization (systematically reading), coding by identifying and labelling interesting features, generating themes by grouping related codes, defining and naming themes, as well as reporting. In other words, the data were interpreted by doing systematic coding of interview transcripts and documentary materials. In doing so, the aforementioned procedures helped to identify key patterns, concepts, and relationships. Also, the main themes were generated in relation to characteristics and strategies of perfect and strategic proposals for consistently securing research funding. Generally, thematic analysis provided the integration of diverse perspectives with a coherent understanding of which types of proposals are more likely to secure funding consistently and the reasons behind their success. Generally, the method identified, analysed and interpreted patterns of meaning (themes) within a dataset.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings on the two questions of this study: Which type of proposal that consistently secure research funding between perfect and strategic proposals in Tanzania? What are the reasons of consistently securing research funding between perfect and strategic proposals in Tanzania?

4.1 Types of Proposal that Consistently Secure Research Funding

The findings reveal that consistently research funding is not always influenced by perfect academic proposals but the strategic proposals in today's competitive world. This is because the perfect proposals have hidden costs of academic perfection while the strategic proposals have good enough revolution and success.

4.1.1 Costs of Perfect Vs. Strategic Research Proposals

The hidden costs of perfect research proposals include missed opportunities while the perfectionist researcher is perfecting the proposal; analysis paralysis, as perfectionist researchers often get stuck in endless planning phases; burnout and anxiety i.e. the perfectionist researchers are linked to anxiety, depression, and academic procrastination; and reduced innovation, the perfectionist researchers focus on perfection by playing safe, avoiding the bold, and risky ideas which could actually get funded

because they might not work perfectly. In fact, use of longer time in perfecting a single grant proposal i.e. use longer time in rewriting the introduction several times, gathering preliminary data for every possible reviewer question, delaying for submission because of wanting more experiment or making the proposal bulletproof, make the perfect research proposal being rejected. The following quotes are from some researchers from surveyed regions:

“I often spend weeks rewriting the introduction and refining every section, trying to make it flawless. By the time I submit, other opportunities have passed me by.”

“I get stuck in what I call analysis paralysis constantly rethinking the methodology and tweaking the figures. Sometimes it feels like I’m never done.”

“The stress of perfecting a single proposal can be overwhelming. I’ve noticed it triggers anxiety and even occasional insomnia.”

“I procrastinate a lot because I want everything to be perfect. Ironically, this delays the submission and increases the risk of missing deadlines.”

“When I focus on perfection, I tend to play it safe. I avoid proposing innovative or risky ideas because they might not appear flawless on paper.”

“I’ve spent countless hours gathering preliminary data for every possible question a reviewer could ask. Sometimes it feels like preparing for an exam rather than writing a proposal.”

“Burnout is real. Trying to make the perfect proposal across multiple submissions has left me drained and demotivated for other projects.”

“I’ve seen colleagues invest months perfecting proposals, only for them to be rejected. The extra time doesn’t guarantee success, and that’s incredibly frustrating.”

“Perfectionism limits creativity. I find myself sticking to conventional ideas instead of exploring bold approaches that might actually attract funding.”

“Delaying submission because I want more experiments or additional data often costs me in the end. Deadlines pass, and sometimes the proposal is still not successful.”

“Trying to make the proposal bulletproof can actually backfire. You spend so much time on minor details that you lose sight of the bigger picture and the strategic fit with funder priorities.”

“I’ve realized that being strategic submitting a strong but not ‘perfect’ proposal is often more effective than endlessly tweaking it. Perfectionism can be a hidden cost to funding success.”

4.1.2 Advantages of Strategic Vs. Perfect Research Proposals

On the other hand, the strategic proposals is strategic by itself. It demonstrates the understanding of what funders want, response to current issues, and formation of the right partnerships. The strategic researchers don't wait for perfect data, submit proposals with compelling preliminary results, they don't perfect their hypotheses and they test bold, fundable ideas. In addition, most strategic researchers don't rush or delay but they align. They refine high-quality proposals over times to respond to any call by, channeling 20% of their energy to match it with precision and submission. In other words, they know that opportunities expire and fundability is about recognizing when strongest version is good enough to compete.

In addition, the strategic researchers focus on the big idea and not the perfect details; the career breakthrough; and they know how to set good enough standards, embrace strategic timing, focus on the big picture, and build momentum through action. They have the mindset shift that changes everything. In so doing, they ask themselves whether the proposal is fundable instead of whether the proposal is perfect; instead of thinking they need more time to perfect their proposal, they think what is the minimum viable proposal that tells their convincing story; and instead of believing it is the perfect proposals which get funded, they believe that it is strategic proposals which get funded. The strategic researchers in their career purely understand that, the researchers who thrive in academia are not the ones who never make mistakes, but they are the ones who make strategic decisions quickly and learn from the outcomes. They are researchers who break free from perfectionism paralysis and develop the strategic mindset that actually gets funded. They are transformed with the truth that, their research does not need to be perfect to change the world but just needs to be out there. The following quotes are from some researchers from surveyed regions:

“I don’t wait for perfect data anymore. I submit proposals with compelling preliminary results, because funders care about the idea and its potential, not perfection.”

“Being strategic means knowing what the funder wants and responding to current issues, rather than endlessly perfecting hypotheses.”

“I focus on forming the right partnerships. Collaborations often make a proposal stronger than any single detail I could perfect on my own.”

“I’ve learned to align my proposals with the timing of calls. I don’t rush, but I also don’t delay opportunities expire if you wait for perfection.”

“I channel about 20% of my energy to match the call precisely. The rest goes into the bigger idea the one that actually moves the field forward.”

“Strategic proposals focus on the story, the impact, the career breakthrough. I don’t get lost in making every detail flawless.”

“I’ve shifted my mindset from asking ‘Is this perfect?’ to ‘Is this fundable?’ That alone changed how quickly I submit and how often I succeed.”

“Instead of waiting to have a perfect proposal, I identify the minimum viable proposal that convincingly tells the story and captures the funder’s interest.”

“Success comes from strategic decisions, not from avoiding mistakes. I submit, learn from the feedback, and iterate for the next opportunity.”

“Breaking free from perfectionism paralysis has transformed my approach. I now focus on action, momentum, and outcomes rather than endless refinement.”

“I realized my research doesn’t need to be perfect to make an impact it just needs to be out there, engaging the right audience and funders.”

“Strategic thinking in proposals is about balancing quality with timeliness, building partnerships, and recognizing when ‘good enough’ is actually strong enough to compete.”

4.2 Reasons for Consistently Securing Research Funding

Section 4.2 portrays the basic grounds of generalising the reasons of consistently securing research funding between perfect and strategic proposals in Tanzania.

4.2.1 Alignment with Funding Priorities

The strategic research proposals unequivocally reflect themes that are pressing or preferred by funding bodies.

“What I personally find that, the proposals which consistently secure funding are the ones which really echo the priorities set by funding organizations. When the

researcher should be able to notice the themes being addressed, not just picked randomly by the researchers as they feel. The researchers should clearly follow what the funders stress most urgent or valuable at the moment of moment of call for proposals” A Researcher from Dar es Salaam

Another researcher from Arusha emphasises that, *“You see, researchers here should be quite aware of the environment they are working in. They should know that for a proposal to stand a chance of winning, it has to align with the issues which funders are wishing to invest in. So, while the researchers may start from their own interest or expertise, they should logically familiarize and align their ideas with what funders are looking for”*

A very experienced from Mwanza expressly states that, *In any way, the researchers must demonstrate a strong strategic thinking in their proposals. This does not mean that the researchers should abandon their own vision, but they should understand the importance of framing their proposals in a way that they speaks directly and responsively to the funding organizations. In fact, in our context where resources are always limited and competition is very high, being strategic in writing proposal becomes a survival skill. Therefore, it is the researchers who make their proposals not only meaningful for the beneficiaries but also competitive enough to attract support from the funders”*.

The given findings are likewise supported by other studies. For instance, strategic proposals explicitly reflect themes that are urgent or favored by funding bodies, such as digital transformation, gender equity, climate resilience, or food security (Brown et al., 2022). Funders routinely update their priorities in response to global trends, and successful applicants tailor their research objectives to these shifts (COSTECH, 2023; Hegde & Sampat, 2019).

4.2.2 Networking and Partnerships

The findings from interviewed researchers reveal that networking and partnerships are ones of the reasons for consistently securing research funding through strategic research proposals.

A researcher from Mwanza says that *“Proposals that bring together people from different fields always stand out. Donors want to see that we’re tackling challenges from more than one angle.”*

The researcher in Mbeya says that *“If an agriculture project also brings in ICT and economics experts, it immediately feels stronger. It shows the team is thinking beyond the farm and into the bigger picture.”*

Another researcher in Dodoma expresses that *“Working with international partners gives a proposal extra weight.*

It reassures funders that the project has wider expertise and stronger backing.”

The researcher in Arusha reveals that *“Collaboration isn’t always easy, but it pays off. Funders value projects that are inclusive and able to approach problems in a complete way.”*

Finally, the researcher from Morogoro portrays that *“Here in Tanzania, partnerships are about more than money they open doors, build networks, and create opportunities long after the funding is gone.”*

The given findings are also supported by previous studies. For example, Nguyen *et al.* (2021) shows that collaborations, especially cross-disciplinary and international ones boost the appeal of proposals. The funders perceive such networks as indicators of implementation capacity and broader impact in funding (Bozeman & Youtie, 2020). In Tanzania, this is evident in funding programmes that reward partnerships (Brown *et al.*, 2022).

4.2.3 Timing and Responsiveness

The findings generally indicate that timing and responsiveness is one of the reasons for successful proposals in consistently securing research funding through strategic research proposals.

“From what we’ve seen here, the researchers who succeed in getting grants are not just smart, they are quick on their feet. For example, when a call for proposals comes from a funder like the African Development Bank or the Ministry of Agriculture, they don’t wait. They attend the webinars, ask questions, and adjust their applications based on the advice they receive. It’s that agility that often sets them apart.”

Furthermore, Dar es Salaam Researcher says that *“I’ve noticed that successful applicants also keep a close eye on trends. Take the health sector here if malaria prevention or digital health is the current priority, the proposals that reflect these trends tend to attract more attention. It’s about understanding what the funders care about now and positioning your idea, so it really hits the mark.”*

Dodoma Researcher further speaks that *“What amazes me is how much responsiveness matters. It’s not just about having a strong idea; it’s about being willing to revise and improve your proposal based on feedback. I know colleagues who, after a few rounds of adjustments, finally secured funding from local and international donors. They treat grant applications almost like a craft you learn, adapt, and improve each time, and it really pays off in the long run.”*

The above findings are also supported by previous studies. Mackay and Munro (2022) highlight that successful grant applicants are not only strategic but also agile; they respond quickly to calls, attend informational webinars, and revise submissions based on feedback. They monitor trends and position their proposals for maximum relevance (Nicholson & Bennett, 2021).

4.2.4 Institutional Support and Mentorship

The findings from interviewed researchers reveal that institutional support and mentorship are ones of the reasons for consistently securing research funding through strategic research proposals.

For example, the researcher from Arusha reveals that *“Mentorship really transforms the quality of proposals. When experienced researchers guide younger ones, the work becomes clearer, stronger, and far more persuasive to funders.”*

Researcher from Dar es Salaam says that *“Our research office has become like the backbone of proposal writing. They don’t just process forms, they review drafts, align our ideas with donor priorities, and even point us to the right funders. That kind of support makes a big difference.”*

Another researcher from Morogoro articulates that, *“Many of us struggle with the technical side structuring, editing, polishing language. Having an office that helps refine these details makes us confident that our proposals can stand up at the international level.”*

In addition, a researcher from Arusha declares that *“I once submitted a draft that I thought was ready. The institutional team reviewed it and showed me important gaps I had overlooked. After reworking it with their input, the proposal was approved for funding. Without that review, I might have failed.”*

From the researcher in Mwanza, it is noted that *“Mentorship isn’t only about corrections, it’s also about encouragement. When a senior colleague assures you that your idea is relevant, it gives you the energy to push through the tough grant process.”*

Finally, the researcher from Mbeya articulated that, *“I see the research office as a bridge. They link us to calls for proposals we might miss, and sometimes they even connect us with collaborators. Those connections have opened doors I wouldn’t have reached on my own.”*

The above findings are also supported by previous studies. According to Manzoor, Wei, and Asif (2020), mentoring and institutional research support offices play an essential role in building proposal quality and alignment. These structures provide technical editing, concept note

validation, and strategic matching with relevant funders (Luescher & Klemenčič, 2020).

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study conclusively confirms that success in research funding is not always about writing the perfect academic proposal. Instead, it is the strategic proposals that stand out in today's highly competitive landscape not only in Tanzania but also beyond. While perfection often comes with hidden costs such as unnecessary complexity, delays, and rigidity, strategic proposals strike a balance. This means that, strategic research proposals are rigorous enough to be credible, flexible, relevant, and aligned with what funders are actually looking for.

5.2 Recommendations

The findings of this study have different implications for researchers, institutions, funders, policy makers and for sustainability.

1. The researchers should aim not only for academic perfection but also for agility i.e. knowing how to adapt, respond to feedback, and frame ideas in ways that resonate with funders.
2. Institutions like universities and research centers need to strengthen their support systems for their researchers through mentorship, proposal review offices, and training workshops. This initiative would enable the researchers to be guided in writing proposals that are both academically sound and strategically competitive.
3. It is important for funders to look beyond polish and perfection. Some of the most impactful projects may not arrive in the most polished document but can deliver strong results if given the chance. Valuing relevance, timeliness, and contextual fit can open doors for diverse and innovative research.
4. Policy makers should get acquainted that funding policies should encourage flexibility, inclusivity, and alignment with national and regional priorities. This helps reduce barriers for emerging researchers and ensures that funded projects have practical impact on society.
5. This study has implications in sustainability. Ultimately, striking a balance between rigour and strategy benefits everyone: researchers increase

their chances of success, institutions expand their research impact, and funders and policymakers see real returns in terms of innovation and social development.

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