

Walden University

Dissertation Prospectus Guide

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A higher degree. A higher purpose.

What's New in 2018

The 2018 edition of the *Dissertation Prospectus Guide* contains additional material to support prospectus development. What has *not* changed are the basic expectations for the content of the prospectus and how it will be evaluated and approved. Specific new items in this guide include

- discussion about research design alignment;
- added clarity in the outline annotations;
- enhanced formatting for better presentation, including a separate Purpose section;
- updated sample prospectuses to include both a quantitative and a qualitative example; and
- the sample prospectus documents captured in the historic alignment tool (HAT), which is introduced in Residency 3.

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The Prospectus

The *Dissertation Prospectus* is a brief document that provides preliminary information about your dissertation research and is used in two ways:

- It serves as an agreed-upon ***plan for developing the proposal*** and is evaluated to ensure doctoral-level work.
- It serves as a step to finalize the ***structure of your dissertation supervisory committee***, who will work with you on completing the dissertation.

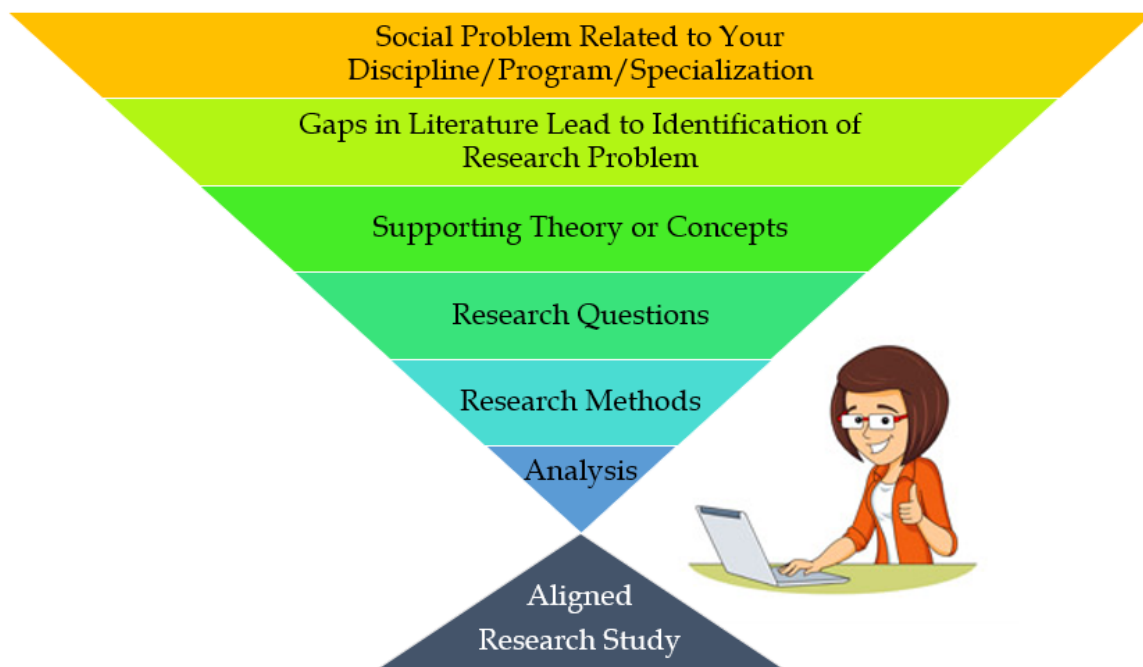
Completing the Prospectus

The *Dissertation Prospectus* consists of several short sections, which are detailed in the annotated outline. Your goal for the prospectus is to create a plan for developing your dissertation proposal. Therefore, you need to have more information for the prospectus than for your earlier documents, such as the *Dissertation Premise*, but you do not need to know all the specific details of the study that you will ultimately conduct. For example, you may identify *intelligence* as a covariate in a quantitative study, but at this point, you do not yet need to identify the instrument that you plan to use to measure the covariate.

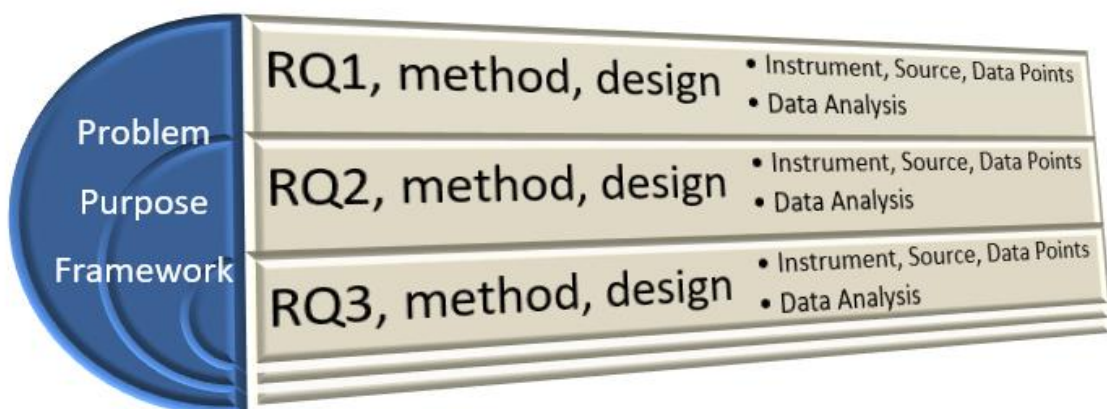
Also, because every research project is unique, and because this outline is general, you may be asked to include additional information in your prospectus to help assure your supervisory committee that you are headed in the right direction. For example, *feasibility* will be one criterion for evaluating your prospectus, and if you are considering a very unique sample group, your committee may ask that you explore that aspect in more detail before moving forward.

The *Dissertation Prospectus* should follow the guidelines in the sixth edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* and be saved as either a .doc, .docx, or .rtf file. As you work on the document, you may also want to review the *Litmus Test for a Doctoral-Level Research Problem*, which is available on the [Research Resources](#) page of the [Center for Research Quality](#) site, your historic alignment tool (HAT) from your academic residency experience, as well as the nine quality indicators included in this guide.

One prospectus quality indicator that is not included as a separate *section* in the prospectus document, but rather is holistically assessed *throughout* the prospectus, is research design alignment. The rubric item reads: “*Aligned?* Do the various components of the research plan align overall?” Alignment is critically important to research quality. Research design alignment means that all pieces of the study design match and/or complement one another. For example, the identified doctoral-level problem must drive the purpose of the study and the research questions. The framework must support the research approach overall. There should be common language throughout, with concepts and theories corresponding with the problem and purpose—meaning that language should be repeated from earlier sections into later sections. As you write, be sure to connect the dots among each section of the prospectus, ensuring alignment throughout. The visual below represents this idea.



Conceptualizing the research plan and the various components of the research design is sometimes challenging. One way to assist with this and to ensure research design alignment is to use a visual to help you see how the various parts of a research design should fit together and therefore must align with one another. For example, as presented in the graphic below, the *Problem Statement*, *Purpose*, and *Framework* in the prospectus must align with all other pieces of the research design. This example has three research questions. If one research question does not appear to fit with the study purpose, it does not belong in the study design. The method and design make up the section in the prospectus called “Nature of the Study.” Each section must coordinate with the others.



As a self-check, you should ask yourself these questions about your research design:

1. Is there a logical progression from the research problem to the purpose of the study?
2. Does the identified framework ground the investigation in the stated problem?

3. Do the problem, purpose, and framework align with the RQ(s) and nature of the study?
4. Does each RQ address the problem and align with the purpose of the study?
5. Will the instrument, data source, and analysis address the RQ?

Depending on your academic program, you will be in a course of some type that supports prospectus development and will work with your committee chair and second member to complete the document. See your specific program of study for more information on the type of course and the timing of it. Keep in mind that prospectus development is an *iterative process* and that you will receive feedback on working drafts, as will happen with the proposal and dissertation.

When your supervisory committee members agree that your prospectus meets all the quality indicators discussed herein, they will endorse it for review by your academic program director or designee. After the program director or designee gives final approval of the prospectus and your supervisory committee, you will start working on your proposal. This entire approval process will occur in My Doctoral Research (MyDR).

My Doctoral Research (MyDR)

If you have not done so already, you should familiarize yourself with the [MyDR](#) system and other resources on the [Center for Research Quality](#) website. The MyDR system was designed to assist you and your committee in navigating your doctoral research journey, from the very beginning through the final approval. The various landing pages in MyDR will track your progress and will serve as a central location for resources to support that progress. The Taskstream element of the MyDR system is used to establish a process flow tool in which you exchange and store faculty evaluations of and feedback on your work as you progress along that journey.

You will be entered into the MyDR system when *both* your committee chair and second member nominees are approved by the academic program. At that point, you will be able to access MyDR from the homepage of your dissertation completion course in Blackboard. The first document that you will submit for approval in MyDR will be your prospectus.

An Annotated Outline

The *Prospectus* document includes a title page (page 1) followed by pages containing the required elements in the prospectus. Please use the Prospectus template that is available on the [Writing Center](#) website.

Title Page

The recommended title length is 12 words or fewer to include the topic, the variables and relationship between them, and the critical keywords. Double-space the title if over one line of type and center it under the word “Prospectus.” Please note that your dissertation title will likely change as the project evolves.

Include your name, your program of study (and specialization, if applicable), and Student ID number—double-spaced and centered under the title.

Title

Start with “Prospectus” and a colon, and then include the title as it appears on the title page. Double-space if over one line of type and center it at the top of the page.

Problem Statement

Note:

A *social problem* involves an issue that affects a specific population/discipline. It is the issue that students see “on the ground” so to speak. The social problem is often what prompts students to think about a topic of interest drives their dissertation topic. Usually such a topic is one that students identify with, sometimes having personally experienced some aspect of the problem as it exists in the world. All too often, students want to solve a specific social, organizational, clinical, or practical problem rather than explore a research problem.

A *research problem* is a focused topic of concern, a condition to be improved upon, or troubling question that is supported in scholarly literature or theory that you study to understand in more detail, and that can lead to recommendations for resolutions. It is the research problem that drives the rest of the dissertation: the purpose, the research questions, and the methodology. It is the research problem that is identified in the Problem Statement of the prospectus.

Provide a one- to two-paragraph statement that is the result of a review of research findings and current practice and that contains the following information:

1. A logical argument for the *need to address an identified gap in the research literature* that has current relevance to the discipline and area of practice. Keep in mind that a gap in the research is not, in and of itself, a reason to conduct research. Make sure to clarify the problem that led you to the gap. The situation being experienced in a societal population or discipline is described within the problem statement.
2. Preliminary evidence that provides *justification* that this problem is meaningful to the discipline or professional field. Provide three to five key citations that support the relevance and currency of the problem. These references need not all be from peer-reviewed journals but should be from reputable sources, such as national agency

databases or scholarly books, and should ideally be from the past 5 years.

3. Assure that the problem is framed within and primarily focused on the discipline (program of study).

Purpose

Present a concise, one-paragraph statement on the overall ***purpose or intention*** of the study, which serves as the connection between the problem being addressed and the focus of the study.

- In quantitative studies, state *what needs be studied* by describing two or more factors (variables) and a conjectured relationship among them related to the identified gap or problem.
- In qualitative studies, describe the *need for increased understanding about the issue* to be studied, based on the identified gap or problem.
- In mixed-methods studies, with both quantitative and qualitative aspects, clarify *how the two approaches will be used together* to inform the study.

Significance

Provide one or two paragraphs, informed by the topic in the problem statement, that describe the following:

1. How this study will contribute to filling the gap identified in the problem statement: What ***original contribution*** will this study make?
2. How this research will support professional practice or allow practical application: Answer the *So what?* question.
3. How the claim aligns with the problem statement to reflect the potential relevance of this study to society: How might the potential findings lead to ***positive social change***?

Background

Provide (a) the keywords or phrases that you searched and the databases used; and (b) a representative list of scholarship and findings, or an annotated bibliography, that *support and clarify the main assertions* in the problem statement, highlighting their relationship to the topic, for example, “this variable was studied with a similar sample by Smith (2013) and Johnson (2014)” or “Jones’s (2012) examination of industry leaders showed similar trends in the same key segments.” Some of these resources may have already been mentioned in the first sections of the prospectus and can be included here, also. Provide 5 to 10 peer-reviewed articles most of which should have been published within the last 5 years and/or represent current information on the topic.

Framework (Conceptual or Theoretical)

In one paragraph, describe the framework that demonstrates an understanding of the theories and concepts relevant to your topic. Align the framework with the problem, purpose, research questions, and background of your study. This theoretical or conceptual framework is

the basis for understanding, designing, and analyzing ways to investigate your research problem (data collection and analysis). Provide the original scholarly literature on the theory or concepts even if it is more than 5 years old. Please do not cite secondary sources.

Research Question(s) and Hypotheses (if applicable)

List the question or a series of related questions that are informed by the study purpose, which will lead to the development of *what needs to be done* in this study and *how it will be accomplished*. A research question informs the research design by providing a foundation for

- generation of hypotheses in quantitative studies,
- questions necessary to build the design structure for qualitative studies, and
- a process by which different methods will work together in mixed-methods studies.

Nature of the Study

Provide a concise paragraph that (a) presents the approach that will be used to address the research question(s) and (b) discusses how this approach aligns with the problem statement. The examples of study design are as follows:

- **Quantitative**—for experimental, quasiexperimental, or nonexperimental designs; treatment-control; repeated measures; causal-comparative; single-subject; predictive studies; or other quantitative approaches
- **Qualitative**—for ethnography, case study, grounded theory, narrative inquiry, phenomenological research, policy analysis, or other qualitative traditions
- **Mixed methods, primarily quantitative**—for sequential, concurrent, or transformative studies, with the main focus on quantitative methods
- **Mixed methods, primarily qualitative**—for sequential, concurrent, or transformative studies, with the main focus on qualitative methods
- **Other**—for another design, to be specified with a justification provided for its use

Possible Types and Sources of Data

Secondary data include public or existing data that are collected by others. Primary data are collected by the researcher. Provide a list of *possible* types and sources of data that could be used to address the proposed research question(s), such as test scores from college students, employee surveys, observations of a phenomenon, interviews with practitioners, historical documents from state records, de-identified medical records, or information from a federal database. For secondary, or preexisting data, identify the data source, how the data will be accessed, and the data points that will be used to address the research questions. For primary data, explain the data points, how the data will be obtained, and potential participants who will be accessed to address the research questions. Possible [secondary data sources](#), by program, are available on the Center for Research Quality website. Sources of information that support and clarify the problem belong in the Background section.

If you are thinking about collecting data on a sensitive topic or from a vulnerable population, an early consultation with the Institutional Review Board (IRB; IRB@waldenu.edu) during your prospectus writing process is recommended to gain ethics guidance that you can

incorporate into your subsequent proposal drafts and research planning. Find more information on the [IRB Guides and FAQs](#) page.

Limitations, Challenges, and/or Barriers

Provide information on limitations, challenges, and/or barriers that may need to be addressed when conducting this study. These may include access to participants, access to data, separation of roles (researcher versus employee), instrumentation fees, etc.

References

On a new page, list your references formatted in the correct style (sixth edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, modeled at the end of this guide) for all citations within the *Dissertation Prospectus*.

Sample Quantitative Prospectus

Prospectus

Differences in the Quality of Problem Statements Written Throughout the Capstone Process

Alpha B. Gamma

General Studies program – General specialization

A00000000

Prospectus: Differences in the Quality of Problem Statements Written Throughout the Capstone Process

Problem Statement

Conducting a supervised independent research project is a unique feature of completing a doctoral degree (Lovitts, 2008; Luse, Mennecke, & Townsend, 2012). Contrary to the commonly held belief of a 50% all-but-dissertation (ABD) rate, only approximately 20% of doctoral students are unable to complete the dissertation after finishing their coursework (Lovitts, 2008; Wendler et al., 2010). The challenge of the dissertation is not a new phenomenon in higher education, but what is new is the growing number of students who complete their academic programs online (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Kumar, Johnson, & Hardemon, 2013). Although many students are ultimately successful in defining the central argument for a doctoral capstone, how this process occurs in a distributed environment has not been well researched.

In their book on doctoral education, Walker, Golde, Jones, Conklin- Bueschel, and Hutchings (2009) highlight the need to develop more “pedagogies of research” (p. 151) for teaching graduate students to be scholars. Although a modest body of scholarship exists on research training in traditional programs, emerging research suggests that the online environment offers some unique challenges and opportunities for doctoral students (Baltes, Hoffman-Kipp, Lynn, & Weltzer-Ward, 2010; Kumar et al., 2013; Lim, Dannels, & Watkins, 2008). Of the many aspects of a research project, development of the problem statement is arguably a key step because it provides the rationale for the entire dissertation (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Luse et al., 2012). Hence, this study will fill a gap in the research by focusing specifically on the development of problem statements by students in online doctoral programs.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine differences in the quality of problem statements written by doctoral students in online programs during the various stages of their doctoral studies. Secondary data that include objective ratings of problem statements by doctoral faculty over the course of the capstone process will be examined for differences. This project is unique because it addresses an underresearched area of higher education (Gardner & Barnes, 2014) with a group of learners that has expanded over the past decade (Bell, 2011).

Significance

The results of this study will provide much-needed insights into the processes by which increasing numbers of new scholars work through the beginning phase of their research. Insights from this study should aid doctoral committees in helping students to succeed in their final projects, thus supporting eventual degree attainment. Education has long been a force for social change by addressing inequities in society. Because a broad range of students attend online institutions, supporting their successful attainment of a terminal degree allows for increased diversity among individuals in key academic and scholarly leadership positions.

Background

Selected articles relating to doctoral education and the process of learning to be a researcher are described here. The keywords searched were *ABD*, *online doctoral program completion*, *doctoral capstone completion*, *online research training*, and *online learning* in the databases Education Source, ERIC, and SAGE Journals, as well as in a Thoreau multidatabase search.

1. Baltes et al. (2010) and Bieschke (2006) provided information on research self-efficacy, which has been shown as a key predictor of the future research of doctoral students.
2. Gelso (2006), Holmes (2009), Hilliard (2013), and Kim and Karau (2009) provided different views of strategies to support the development of scholar practitioners during the capstone experience.
3. Ivankova and Stick (2007) and Kumar et al. (2013) offered models that align well with the possible methodologies used in this study and that involved online students.
4. Lim et al. (2008) addressed the role of research courses in an online program.
5. Lovitts (2008), Gardner and Barnes (2014), and Werner and Rogers (2013) gave different views of the transition from student to researcher.
6. Ismail, Majid, and Ismail (2013); Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012); and Stubb, Pyhältö, and Lonka (2014) focused on the student experience of learning to conduct research.

Framework

The theoretical base for this study will be Perry's (1970) theory of epistemological development. Because this theory addresses ways of knowing in adults, Perry's theoretical work has been used extensively in all aspects of higher education, albeit more frequently with undergraduates than with doctoral students. The approach provides details on cognitive-structural changes that emerge as a result of development and learning. Further, subsequent research and application of Perry's theory offer guidance on ways to facilitate academic development, thus allowing for insight into the pedagogical challenge of the dissertation (Gardner, 2009).

Research Question(s) and Hypotheses

RQ—Quantitative: Based on objective ratings by doctoral faculty, what are the differences in the overall quality of problem statements as students progress through the doctoral study process?

H_{01} —Based on objective ratings by doctoral faculty, there are no statistically significant differences in the overall quality of problem statements as students progress through the doctoral study process.

H_1 —Based on objective ratings by doctoral faculty, there are statistically significant differences in the overall quality of problem statements as students progress through the doctoral study process.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study will be quantitative research with a repeated-measure design consistent with understanding how students approach the work of creating a successful doctoral study problem statement, which is the primary focus of this doctoral study. To elucidate how a viable research problem emerges, objective ratings of student work products will be examined across time. This quantitative analysis should help pinpoint the amount of growth from the beginning to the end of the project.

Possible Types and Sources of Data

Data will be accessed from an online doctoral program. The program collects and rates doctoral problem statements written at four key points in a doctoral student's career: the premise, the prospectus, the proposal, and the doctoral study writing stage. The data will be deidentified and contain the scores by stage of program for 300 online doctoral students. Other data may be

collected from surveys of instructors.

Limitations, Challenges, and/or Barriers

A potential barrier, if using secondary data, is that data access may include a partner-site agreement and possible fees for data access. A potential barrier for collecting primary data (surveys) includes recruitment of participants.

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Sample Qualitative Prospectus

Prospectus

How Online Doctoral Students Develop a Dissertation Problem Statement

Alpha B. Gamma

General Studies program – General specialization

A00000000

Prospectus: How Online Doctoral Students Develop a Dissertation Problem Statement

Problem Statement

Conducting a supervised independent research project is a unique feature of completing a doctoral degree (Lovitts, 2008; Luse, Mennecke, & Townsend, 2012). Contrary to the commonly held belief of a 50% all-but-dissertation (ABD) rate, only approximately 20% of doctoral students are unable to complete the dissertation after finishing their coursework (Lovitts, 2008; Wendler et al., 2010). The challenge of the dissertation is not a new phenomenon in higher education, but what is new is the growing number of students who complete their academic programs online (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Kumar, Johnson, & Hardemon, 2013). Although many students are ultimately successful in defining the central argument for a doctoral capstone, how this process occurs in a distributed environment has not been well researched.

In their book on doctoral education, Walker, Golde, Jones, Conklin- Bueschel, and Hutchings (2009) highlight the need to develop more “pedagogies of research” (p. 152) for teaching graduate students to be scholars. Although a modest body of scholarship exists on research training in traditional programs, emerging research suggests that the online environment offers some unique challenges and opportunities for doctoral students (Baltes, Hoffman-Kipp, Lynn, & Weltzer-Ward, 2010; Kumar et al., 2013; Lim, Dannels, & Watkins, 2008). Of the many aspects of a research project, development of the problem statement is arguably a key step because it provides the rationale for the entire dissertation (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Luse et al., 2012). Hence, this study will fill a gap in the research by focusing specifically on the development of problem statements by students in online doctoral programs.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to improve the understanding of the process by which doctoral students in online programs arrive at a viable problem statement for their dissertations. To address this gap, the study approach will use the qualitative paradigm. Interviews will be used to develop an understanding of students' strategies for formulating problem statements.

Significance

This research will fill a gap in understanding by focusing specifically on development of problem statements by students in online doctoral programs. This project is unique because it addresses an underresearched area of higher education (Gardner & Barnes, 2014) among a group of learners that has expanded over the past decade (Bell, 2011). The results of this study will provide much-needed insights into the processes by which increasing numbers of new scholars work through the beginning phase of their research. Insights from this study should aid doctoral committees and academic programs in helping students to succeed in their final projects, thus supporting eventual degree attainment. Education has long been a force for social change by addressing inequities in society. Because a broad range of students attends online institutions, supporting their successful attainment of a terminal degree allows for increased diversity among individuals in key academic and scholarly leadership positions.

Background

Selected articles relating to doctoral education and the process of learning to be a researcher are described here. The keywords searched were *ABD*, *online doctoral program completion*, *doctoral capstone completion*, *online research training*, and *online learning* in the

databases Education Source, ERIC, and SAGE Journals, as well as in a Thoreau multidatabase search.

1. Baltes et al. (2010) and Bieschke (2006) provided information on research self-efficacy, which has been shown as a key predictor of the future research of doctoral students.
2. Gelso (2006), Holmes (2009), Hilliard (2013), and Kim and Karau (2009) provided different views of strategies to support the development of scholar practitioners during the capstone experience.
3. Ivankova and Stick (2007) and Kumar et al. (2013) offered models that align well with the possible methodologies used in this study and that involved online students.
4. Lim et al. (2008) addressed the role of research courses in an online program.
5. Lovitts (2008), Gardner and Barnes (2014), and Werner and Rogers (2013) gave different views of the transition from student to researcher.
6. Ismail, Majid, and Ismail (2013); Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012); and Stubb, Pyhältö, and Lonka (2014) focused on the student experience of learning to conduct research.

Framework

The framework for this study will be based on Perry's (1970) theory of epistemological development. Because this theory addresses ways of knowing in adults, Perry's theoretical work has been used extensively in all aspects of higher education, albeit more frequently with undergraduates than with doctoral students. Concepts explored will include what online learning is and the pedagogical challenges associated with online learning and dissertation writing. The

approach provides details on cognitive-structural changes that emerge as a result of development and learning. Further, subsequent research and application of Perry's theory offers guidance on ways to facilitate academic development, thus allowing for insight into the pedagogical challenge of the dissertation (Gardner, 2009).

Research Question(s)

RQ–Qualitative: For students with a high-quality problem statement at the dissertation stage, what themes emerge in their reports of the process that they used to develop it?

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study will be qualitative with a generic qualitative approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative research is consistent with understanding how students approach the work of creating a successful dissertation problem statement, which is the focus of this dissertation. Keeping the focus on how students make sense of their dissertation research should be consistent with Perry's (1970) epistemological expectations at this point in their development (Gardner, 2009).

Possible Types and Sources of Data

Data for the study will include interviews with a representative group of doctoral graduates who have successfully defended their dissertations and whose work was highly ranked by faculty. In addition, the design may include, as a possible source for triangulation, interviews with doctoral faculty who have helped students to succeed.

Limitations, Challenges, and/or Barriers

Potential barriers include the partner site agreement and possible difficulty recruiting participants for interviews. Ensuring clear separation of my role at the institution from my role as researcher may also be a challenge.

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Quality Indicators

Nine key indicators have been identified to assure the overall quality of the dissertation project at this point in its development. Supervisory committee members will use these indicators to give ongoing feedback and to document their final evaluation of the *Dissertation Prospectus* in MyDR. Students should use these indicators to guide development of their prospectus.

Dissertation Prospectus Rubric

A *Dissertation Prospectus* shows the potential of leading to a doctoral-quality dissertation *only* if the answer to *all* of the following standards is “Met” on the rubric.

1. Complete?

Does the prospectus contain all the required elements? Refer to the annotated outline to see the required parts of the *Dissertation Prospectus* document.

2. Meaningful?

Has a meaningful problem or gap in the research literature been identified? In other words, is addressing this problem the logical next step, given the previous exploratory and confirmatory research (or lack thereof) on this topic? It is not acceptable to simply replicate previous research for a PhD degree.

3. Justified?

Is evidence presented that this problem is significant to the discipline and/or professional field? The prospectus should provide relevant statistics and evidence, documentable discrepancies, and other scholarly facts that point to the significance and urgency of the problem.

4. Grounded?

Is the problem framed to enable the researcher to either build upon or counter the previously published findings on the topic? For most fields, grounding involves articulating the problem within the context of a theoretical base or conceptual framework. Although many approaches can ground a study in the scientific literature, the essential requirement is that the problem is framed such that the new findings will have implications for the previous findings.

5. Original?

Does this project have potential to make an original contribution? The problem must be an authentic “puzzle” that needs solving, not merely a topic that the researcher finds interesting. Addressing the problem should result in an original contribution to the field or discipline.

6. Impact?

Does this project have potential to affect positive social change? As described in the Significance section (see annotated outline), the anticipated findings have potential to support the mission of Walden University to promote positive social change.

7. Feasible?

Can a systematic method of inquiry be used to address the problem; and does the approach have the potential to address the problem while considering potential risks and burdens placed on research participants? The tentative methodology demonstrates that the researcher has considered the options for inquiry, selected an approach that has potential to address the problem, and considered potential risks and burdens placed on research participants.

8. Aligned?

Do the various aspects of the prospectus align overall? The nature of the study should align with the problem, research questions, and tentative approaches to inquiry.

9. Objective?

Is the topic approached in an objective manner? The framing of the problem should not reveal bias or present a foregone conclusion. Even if the researcher has a strong opinion on the expected findings, the researcher must maximize scholarly objectivity by framing the problem in the context of a systematic inquiry that permits multiple possible conclusions.

Self-Check Item on Partner Site Masking

Walden capstones typically mask the identity of the partner organization. The methodological and ethical reasons for this practice as well as criteria for exceptions are outlined in [Guidance on Masking Partner Organizations in Walden Capstones](#).

If you perceive that your partner organization's identity would be impossible to mask or if there is a strong rationale for naming the organization in your capstone, the program director must review your request for an exception. If granted, that exception will need to be confirmed by the IRB during the ethics review process. The IRB will also ensure that your consent form(s) and/or site agreement(s) permit naming the organization.

Ten Tips for Writing a Quality Prospectus

Prospectuses tend to be as unique as the students writing them, so specific strategies are hard to offer. Based on a recent institutional analysis, the following general tips are provided to support successful approval. Students should ensure they can answer “Yes” to the following questions.

1. *Is it complete?*

One of the most common reasons that a prospectus is sent back is one of the simplest to fix: Some pieces are missing. You should ask yourself, “Did I *effectively* respond to *every* item on the annotated outline?”

2. *Is it well written?*

Your prospectus is the first time that your scholarly writing style is on full display for your committee. The prospectus needs to be a preview of what they can expect when they agree to work with you. Certainly, if your writing is unclear, your supervisory committee will have a difficult time ascertaining whether you have met the quality indicators. If you need added support with your writing, now is the time to find it. The [Walden Writing Center](#) offers webinars and multimedia resources to assist students with improving their academic writing, and the [Academic Skills Center](#) offers courses to help students improve their writing skills. If you need refreshers and support with key research concepts, the [Center for Research Quality](#) site has additional resources.

3. *Are the parts and sections aligned?*

Of all the quality indicators, alignment tends to be one of the more challenging because it transcends the content in the prospectus. Some examples of misalignment are as follows: research on children has been reviewed when the study is concerned with adults, the intended sample group does not seem appropriate to provide information to answer the research question, and the study is labeled as qualitative even though the intention is to draw inferences from a statistical test of group differences. Importantly, all the parts—not just some—need to align.

4. *Is the topic relevant to my discipline and program of study?*

Doctoral students are encouraged to explore scholarship from a variety of disciplines as they formulate their questions. When choosing their actual research topic, however, they need to be especially careful to not go beyond their own disciplinary program of study area.

5. *Did I answer the “So what?” question?*

Too often, what is obvious to the student is not always captured in what is written in the prospectus. Ironically, one area that seems to get neglected is the social change statement, because the writer assumes that the reader understands the full impact of the situation and how this research will have potential for a positive impact. Make sure you are clear on

why so many people, including your committee *and* your participants, will need to invest their time in this project.

6. *Is the prospectus presented in an objective manner?*

Students are encouraged to develop a deep understanding of the problem and the people affected by it. When coupled with experiences gained through one's work as a practitioner, however, it is tempting to lose sight of researcher objectivity. It is certainly acceptable to have a hypothesis based on your understanding of the research literature, but you should not suggest an answer before you have started the study ("I want to prove this point") or offer solutions before the study has been completed ("I know what needs to happen here").

7. *Did I do my "homework"?*

Although the prospectus sets the stage for a more in-depth examination of a research topic, students are still expected to conduct a preliminary literature review. Be careful not to equate "Here's a gap in the research" with "I haven't looked at the research." Students are sometimes shocked at how much research has already been done on a topic after they start digging into it, even if more research is eventually needed.

8. *Have I identified a research question?*

A common mistake that new researchers make is to confuse the broader social problem with the research question that will be the focus of the dissertation, because the two are related. Although much is often known about the scope and nature of the social problem (e.g., incident rates, outcomes), less information may be available on how to address the social problem, or it would not be a problem. What is often lacking in the situation is some piece of information or understanding that can be used to address the social problem. *That* question or gap is what your research will address.

9. *Is my topic too broad?*

Most doctoral students have overly ambitious research goals at the beginning, and we rarely have to ask someone to "do more." Usually, the struggle is to identify a focused, doable question that fits within the expectations of a dissertation. Exploring the existing research literature for similar studies is one way to see how other researchers have shaped their questions. Keep in mind that a tightly conceived, well-executed study of one robust research question is better than a dissertation that tries to answer a bunch of tangentially related questions with a variety of methods.

10. *Have you considered the feasibility of the study?*

The prospectus is a plan to develop the proposal, and the proposal is where many key research decisions are finalized. Still, it is never too early to start thinking about the feasibility of conducting the study, which is why it is one of the quality indicators. Like all the indicators, feasibility is a quality that you will revisit as the project evolves. At the prospectus stage, you need to show your supervisory committee that you are considering your choices in light of previous scholarship and what you have learned about the research process in your courses.

Sample Quantitative Prospectus in the Historic Alignment Tool (HAT)

The HAT is a tool that is introduced in Residency 3 to help students see the alignment in their prospectus and to track the changes they have made along the way. What follows is a HAT that might have been developed for the Sample Quantitative Prospectus that appears in this guide.

Problem Statement

There is a lack of information on how online doctoral students develop their research problem and whether the quality of the problem statement varies over time.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine differences in the quality of problem statements written by doctoral students in online programs during the various stages of their doctoral studies.

Potential Significance

Results may help promote the success of online doctoral students.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

RQ—Quantitative: Based on objective ratings by doctoral faculty, what are the differences in the overall quality of problem statements as students progress through the doctoral study process?

H_{01} —Based on objective ratings by doctoral faculty, there are no statistically significant differences in the overall quality of problem statements as students progress through the doctoral study process.

H_1 —Based on objective ratings by doctoral faculty, there are statistically significant differences in the overall quality of problem statements as students progress through the doctoral study process.

Theories or Conceptual Frameworks

Perry's theory of epistemological development

Method of Inquiry

Quantitative

Data Collection

Ratings by faculty members

Data Analysis Method

To be determined

Implications for Positive Social Change

Online education has expanded the reach of higher education to a more diverse group of learners, many of whom serve in key leadership roles. These results may support their success and eventual advancement.

Alignment Check | See how you can "connect the dots" from the problem to the purpose and throughout the rest of the research design components.

Sample Qualitative Prospectus in the Historic Alignment Tool (HAT)

The HAT is a tool that is introduced in Residency 3 to help students see the alignment in their prospectus and to track the changes they have made along the way. What follows is a HAT that might have been developed for the Sample Qualitative Prospectus that appears in this guide.

Problem Statement

There is a lack of information on how online doctoral students go about developing their research problem statement for their dissertations.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to improve the understanding of the process by which doctoral students in online programs arrive at a viable problem statement for their dissertations.

Potential Significance

Results may help promote the success of online doctoral students.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

RQ–Qualitative: For students with a high-quality problem statement at the dissertation stage, what themes emerge in their reports of the process that they used to develop it?

Theories or Conceptual Frameworks

Perry’s theory of epistemological development along with the concepts of online education and pedagogical challenges in the online environment.

Method of Inquiry

Qualitative with a generic qualitative approach.

Data Collection

Interviews with students and possibly interviews with faculty

Data Analysis Method

To be determined

Implications for Positive Social Change

Online education has expanded the reach of higher education to a more diverse group of learners, many of whom serve in key leadership roles. These results may support their success and eventual advancement.

Alignment Check \ See how you can “connect the dots” from the problem to the purpose and throughout the rest of the research design components.