

University of Kentucky

Educational Leadership Studies

Guidelines for the Executive EdD Action
Research Dissertation Prospectus,
Qualifying Exams/Proposal and
Dissertation Defense

Spring 2018

The Action Research Dissertation

Department of Educational Leadership Studies
University of Kentucky

The Executive EdD in Educational Leadership at the University of Kentucky is a doctoral degree for practicing educational leaders. The program is designed to be completed part-time while students continue their careers as full-time professionals in the education, government, or non-profit sectors. The program, including the dissertation, is intended to give students the opportunity to develop and practice skills as practitioner-scholars in the field of leadership.

Leading up to the dissertation, there are three critical milestones for EdD students. These are outlined in detail in the Graduate Student Handbook, located on the EDL website, and presented in the figure below.



The culminating program requirement for students in the Executive EdD in Educational Leadership program is completion of a mixed methods action research, work-embedded dissertation. According to the *Sage Handbook of Action Research* (2008), Reason and Bradbury define action research as

a participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally, the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. (p. 4)

In consultation with their doctoral advisory committee, students will select a leadership problem/issue of practice in their current work setting. The selected area for action and research should be a genuine challenge of leadership practice that is of personal and professional significance. The educational leadership mixed methods action research (MMAR) dissertation represents a sophisticated and complete iteration of a process intended to become ingrained in practitioner-scholars, whereby leaders clearly identify a problem (**diagnose**); collect, analyze, and interpret data about the problem (**reconnaissance**), develop a plan for action/intervention (**planning**), implement an action/intervention plan (**acting**), collect, analyze and interpret data about the action/intervention (**evaluation**); revise and test the action/intervention (**monitor**) and repeat the cycle (Ivankova, 2015).

The completed action research dissertation will include:

- a discussion of the context in which the study takes place;
- research problem statement;
- a targeted review and synthesis of the relevant scholarly literature to support the problem;
- an action (program or intervention), developed based on documented organizational needs and the relevant scholarly research literature (reconnaissance), which is intended to address the identified problem or issue;
- a description of the study mixed methods design (concurrent, sequential, multistrand) which includes the collection of data, analysis, and a framework for evaluating the effects of the proposed action;
- analysis of data collected;
- a presentation of the study's results;
- a discussion of recommendations for continued informed action; and
- a discussion of the implications of findings for leadership practice, policy, and research; and
- a reflection on the student's role as participant-leader and participant-researcher while leading implementation of the action and completing the action research dissertation.

Public defense of the action research dissertation will consist of an oral presentation followed by questions from the candidate's doctoral advisory committee and invited guests including organization stakeholders.

Purpose

The MMAR dissertation is the culminating summative assessment of the University of Kentucky's Executive EdD in Educational Leadership. The MMAR dissertation is intended to be different from traditional EdD and PhD dissertations. While the purpose of traditional EdD and PhD dissertations is to add to the knowledge base in educational leadership, administration or policy, the MMAR dissertation in the Executive EdD in Educational Leadership is intended to give doctoral candidates the opportunity to hone leadership and research skills they have developed throughout the doctoral program by taking on a challenge of leadership practice in their current work settings. Action research methodologies grow out of a critique of more traditional approaches to research in the human service fields; particularly in

response to the charge that traditional research approaches have failed to connect with everyday practice and has not provided a means for practitioners to change work practices (Stringer, 1999). As such, action research generally, and the action research dissertation specifically, is based on the assumptions that (a) “the mere recording of events and formulation of explanations by an uninvolved researcher is inadequate in and of itself,” (b) “those who have previously been designated as ‘subjects’ should participate directly in research processes,” and (c) “[research] processes should be applied in ways that benefit all participants directly” (Stringer, 1999, p. 7).

The MMAR dissertation, in which students take on current challenges of leadership practice in their organizations, has two interrelated purposes:

- A. The MMAR dissertation provides doctoral candidates/educational leaders with the opportunity to develop and refine the skill set of the practitioner-scholar while still having the support and guidance of faculty at the University of Kentucky; and
- B. The MMAR dissertation provides a valuable service to education and education-related organizations in the Commonwealth and beyond, with University of Kentucky doctoral candidates and world-renowned educational leadership faculty working with practitioners to address current, pressing challenges of practice.

Action Research Dissertation Features

The following are key features of the mixed methods action research dissertation:

- The scale of the action (intervention or program) to be developed/adopted and implemented is small enough to be managed successfully while the doctoral candidate continues his/her role as a full time organizational leader; but substantial enough to likely result in positive outcomes for individual participants and the organization. While the project must be small enough to be feasible, it must also be substantial enough to be meaningful for both the researcher and the organization.
- The action to be developed/adopted is informed by relevant scholarly and professional literatures. The literature review for the action research dissertation is different from the traditional EdD and PhD in that the literature reviewed is expected to be specifically relevant to the challenge of practice being addressed and the action to be implemented.
- The aims of the action research dissertation are to develop/adopt and implement an action intended to address a particular challenge of practice in a specific organizational context. Thus, the research design will be based on action research methodologies and will not likely feature research methodologies traditionally used in dissertation research studies. Generalizability of findings is not the intent of action research. “That action research may not conform to conventional criteria of research rigor is much less important than that it takes a more democratic, empowering, and humanizing approach; assists locals in extending their own understanding of their situations; and helps them to resolve the problems they see as important”

(Guba, 1999, p. xiii).

- The action research process is characterized as a collaborative exploration which engages relevant stakeholders in the research process. Thus, the role of the researcher should be more facilitative and less directive (Stringer, 1993).
- The completed action research dissertation is a practicing leader-oriented, reader-friendly report that describes the challenge of leadership practice that has been addressed, the action developed including the theory of action for why it has been developed, an account of the action's implementation; a description of the action research methodology employed; a report of the results; recommendations for continued informed action; a discussion of the study's implications for leadership practice; and the researcher's reflection on his or her role as participant-leader and participant-researcher.

References

Calhoun, E. F. (1993). Action research: Three approaches. *Educational Leadership*, 51(2), 62-65.

Guba, E. G. (1999). Forward. In E. T. Stringer (Ed.), *Action research* (2nd ed., pp. xi-xv). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Ivankova, N. V. (2015). *Mixed methods application in action research: From methods to community action*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (2008). Introduction. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds). *The SAGE handbook of action research: participative inquiry and practice* (2nd ed., pp 1-10). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Sagor, R. (2011). *The action research guidebook: A four-stage process for educators and school teams* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

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Doctoral Prospectus, Qualifying Exam and Research Proposal

Department of Educational Leadership Studies
University of Kentucky

There are three phases of the dissertation process each student will complete. These include the Prospectus Advisement Review; Qualifying Exams and Dissertation Action Research Proposal; and Dissertation Defense or Final Exam. This document provides an overview of the process and requirements for each of these phases.

Prospectus Advisement Review

The purpose of the Prospectus Advisement Review is to present ideas for your MMAR study and gain approval from your full committee to proceed toward the Qualifying Exams and Research Proposal. The steps in the Prospectus Advisement Review include the following.

- A. Work with your advisory committee chair to identify your area of interest and problem/issue of practice that will be the focus of your study.
- B. Prepare an abbreviated MMAR Prospectus that includes the following:
 - a. Context/setting in which your study will take place,
 - b. Research purpose statement (follow general purpose script in Ivankova, 2015).
 - c. Your leadership position within the organization and roles/responsibilities related to the problem/issues to be addressed
 - d. Present your proposed MMAR Framework (follow MM Methodological Framework in AR in Ivankova, 2015)
 - e. Brief review of the literature to support your problem/issue and potential interventions
 - f. Present a timeline for your study.
- C. Schedule a committee meeting with input from your chair. This meeting should occur during the fall semester of your third year after you have completed ELS 620 (Action Research I).
- D. During the Prospectus Advisement Review meeting, you will:
 - a. prepare and present a brief summary of your MMAR study (10 to 15 minutes);
 - b. gather input from your committee on your proposed study; and
 - c. discuss timeframe for your study, Qualifying Examination, and completion of your coursework.

Qualifying Exams (QE) and Research Proposal

The Qualifying Exams (QE) and Research Proposal are completed after you have finished your coursework and prior to submission of your study to the IRB for approval. The oral examination component of the QE must be scheduled through the UK Graduate School at least two weeks prior to the exam date. Specific timelines for scheduling the QE are provided on the Graduate School website. Students who choose to enroll in EDL 767 the semester of their QE must complete the oral examination before the end of the semester or they will be withdrawn from the class.

Written Examination

The written component of the QE includes the major components of Chapters 1 and 2 of your MMAR dissertation. For these chapters, you will:

- A. Enroll in EDL 792 where you will work with the instructor to outline your chapters based on the guideline below. You will simultaneously work with your committee chair to more fully develop the chapters based on the feedback from your committee during the Prospectus Advisement Review.
- B. Work with your committee chair to schedule the oral portion of your QE.
- C. All members of your committee must receive your written QE/Research Proposal at least two weeks prior to your official oral examination.

Oral Examination

The oral component of the qualifying exam includes a brief presentation of the written work, followed by a discussion and questions by the student's committee members. The focus of the questions is on the written examination; however, committee members may also ask questions from coursework that is related to your research.

- A. During your oral portion of the QE you will:
 - a. present a brief summary of your written work (15-20 minutes), and
 - b. defend your written work.
- B. The committee will vote on whether you have successfully defended your written work. The committee will determine needed revisions to proceed with your dissertation research and will provide a timeframe within which you must correct your full study proposal. Your chair will approve the final revision with input from other committee members as needed.
- C. You must complete the IRB process prior to beginning your independent research.

MMAR Dissertation Proposal: Headings and Content

The following outline provides guidance to students in the development of the written component of the Qualifying Examination: the MMAR Dissertation Proposal. The length of each section, section headings, subheadings, or content are to be developed by the student in consultation with the dissertation advisory committee. The format of all headings, subheadings, citations in the text, tables and figures must conform to the current edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association and meet the formatting requirements of the University of Kentucky Graduate School.

The written portion of the QE includes the presentation of the MMAR Study Proposal. The proposal also serves as the first draft of Chapters 1 and 2 of the dissertation.

A sample outline for the Study Plan includes the following:

Chapter 1. Leadership Context, Leadership Problem/Issue & Supporting Literature

The purpose of this chapter is to make a case for the significance of the problem/issue to be addressed by your study, to contextualize your study, and provide a brief introduction to the literature to support your problem/issue and potential intervention/solution.

Main section headings (**bold**) include:

- **Introduction** – VERY BRIEF introduction to the following
 - General purpose and focus of the study
 - Provide the reader with a brief overview of what will be presented in this chapter.
- **Context**
 - Provide an explanation/description of how the action research study is situated in your current work setting or an environment in which you have a locus of control; an environment in which you have the opportunity and/or authority to develop/adopt, implement, and study an action. Answer questions including, but not limited to:
 - What is the context of the proposed action/intervention?
 - What are your leadership role(s) and responsibilities in relation to the problem/issue to be addressed?
 - What is your position as an insider in the context to be studied?
- **Problem of Practice**
 - Make the case to the reader for addressing the proposed issue or problem *of leadership practice in your organization*.
 - State why you have selected this particular problem or issue of leadership practice to address.
 - Describe how the problem/issue has significance for both the organization and the researcher as an organizational leader.
 - Cite existing quantitative and qualitative data which supports the claim there is need for organizational improvement or change.
- **Supporting Literature**
 - Specifically, the review of the literature at this phase is to help the practitioner scholar better understand the problem/issue to be addressed and the potential range of solutions to address the problem/issue.
 - Provide a review of the scholarly and practitioner literature that is relevant to the problem/issues of practice to be addressed.
 - Provide a review of the scholarly and practitioner literature that is relevant to the potential action or intervention to be developed/adopted and implemented.
- **Summary** and Segue
 - Summarize the chapter, placing emphasis the need for an action to address the selected problem/issue of leadership practice.
 - Provide a brief summary of the contents Chapter 2

Chapter 2. Research Plan

The purpose of this chapter is to present your proposed research plan. Sections headings (**bold**) can include:

- **Introduction**
 - Briefly reintroduce problem of practice.
 - Provide the reader with a brief overview of what will be presented in this chapter.
- **Research Setting**
 - Provide a description of the research setting, the organizational collaborators involved in the study and the organizational context for the study.
 - Discuss the role of the research as a participant-leader, participant-researcher.
- Present the **Research Plan**
 - Research purpose statement (follow general purpose script in Ivankova, 2015).
 - Present the overall aim of the study, goal and design.
 - Expected outcomes of the study, study objectives, and research questions;
 - Present your proposed MMAR Framework (follow MM Methodological Framework in AR in Ivankova, 2015).
 - **Methods and Procedures.**
 - Present your **MMAR approach**: explain the major characteristics and purposes of the approach, specify the stages of the process you will use.
 - **MMAR Study Design**: describe your design in detail and for which stage you will use your design; how you will integrate data to make inferences; explain how this design suits your study purpose and questions.
 - Present your **sample**: the sampling scheme, criteria for selection, recruitment procedures and access and stakeholders role in sampling.
 - Describe your **data collection**: how data will be collected; type of data for each strand and rationale; discuss data sources and any data collection issues you think should be considered; provide the timeframe for collection and how you will organize and store the data.
 - Describe your **data analysis**: how data will be analyzed within the design; preparation of data; specific procedures to address study purpose and questions; discuss integration of data based on study design.
 - Describe your proposed action/intervention, the steps you will take to implement the intervention.
- **Quality Assurance**
 - Discuss how you plan to assess the quality of your study and how you plan to evaluate the methodological rigor of each strand implemented.
- **Ethical Considerations**
 - Discuss ways in which you will protect the participants in your study.
 - Address general ethical issues when conducting and action research study.
- **Timeline** for the study including:
 - IRB submission
 - Data collection period
 - Data analysis period
 - Proposed defense date

BACK MATTER

- **Appendices:**
 - Proposed Instruments
 - Additional supportive tables and figures
 - Vita
- **References**

Dissertation Defense (Final Examination)

The Dissertation Defense is completed after you have completed your independent research and is the final step in your doctoral program. Your committee chair (and individual committee members as appropriate) provide guidance while you are conducting your independent research. It is your responsibility to conduct the research and notify your chair and/or other committee members of your progress and areas of need.

You will work with your committee chair to determine when you are ready to schedule your Final Examination. This includes working with your dissertation chair and the DGS to identify potential external examiners for your Dissertation Defense. The Dissertation Defense must be scheduled through the UK Graduate School at least two weeks prior to the oral exam date. You must remain continuously enrolled in a 2-credit residency course (EDL 767) until you defend your dissertation. All students must complete a minimum of two semesters of residency.

Like the Qualifying Examination, the final examination consists of two components: written and oral.

Written Examination

The written component of the Final Examination includes Chapters 1 – 3 of your Dissertation. For these chapters, you will:

- A. Work with your dissertation chair to develop your final three chapters. Your chair is responsible for indicating when you are ready to schedule your final defense.
- B. Work with your committee chair to schedule the oral portion of your final defense.
- C. All members of your committee must receive your final dissertation at least two weeks prior to your official final oral examination.

Oral Examination

The oral component of the final examination includes a brief presentation of the written work, followed by a discussion and questions by your committee members. The focus of the questions is on the written dissertation.

- A. All the members of your dissertation committee must receive your written Dissertation at least two weeks prior to your oral exam.

- B. During your Dissertation Defense you will:
 - a. present a brief summary of your dissertation research study (15 to 20 minutes).
 - b. defend your research and subsequent findings and implications.
- C. The committee will vote on whether you have successfully defended your research study. If the committee determines there are revisions needed, you will be given a timeframe (up to 60 days but before the end of semester deadline as posted by the UK Graduate School) to correct your written Dissertation.
- D. You must work directly with the UK Graduate School for final preparation of your Dissertation. Doctoral students and candidates should review the Graduate School Bulletin each year to remain informed about their responsibilities and time limits (<http://www.research.uky.edu/gs/CurrentStudents/bulletin.html>). Information in the Bulletin is subject to change—not knowing is not an acceptable response to missed deadlines.

IMPORTANT: “All degree requirements for the doctoral must be completed with five years following the semester or summer session in which the candidate successfully completes the qualifying examination” (Graduate School Bulletin, 2011, p. 54).

A complete set of guidelines for your Dissertation follows.

MMAR Dissertation Guidelines: Final Version and Headings Content

Front Matter

Specific requirements for the front matter of the dissertation can be found on the graduate school website.

Chapter 1. Leadership Context, Leadership Problem/Issue & Supporting Literature

The purpose of this chapter is to make a case for the significance of the problem/issue addressed by your study, to contextualize your study, and provide a brief introduction to the literature to support your problem/issue and intervention/solution you implemented.

Section headings (**bold**) include:

- **Introduction** – VERY BRIEF introduction to the following:
 - General purpose and focus of the study.
 - Provide the reader with a brief overview of what will be presented in this chapter.
- **Context**
 - Provide an explanation/description of how the action research study was situated in your work setting or an environment in which you had a locus of control. Present the following:
 - The context of the action/intervention you implemented.
 - Your leadership role(s) and responsibilities in relation to the problem/issue addressed by your study.
 - Your position as an insider in the context studied.
- **Problem of Practice**

- Make the case to the reader of how you addressed the issue or problem *of leadership practice in your organization*.
- State why you selected this particular problem or issue of leadership practice to address.
- Describe how the problem/issue had significance for both the organization and the researcher as an organizational leader.
- Cite existing quantitative and qualitative data which supports the claim there was a need for organizational improvement or change.
- **Supporting Literature**
 - Specifically, the review of the literature at this phase is to help the practitioner scholar better understand the problem/issue addressed and the solutions you used to address the problem/issue.
 - Provide a review of the scholarly and practitioner literature relevant to the problem/issues of practice addressed.
 - Provide a review of the scholarly and practitioner literature relevant to the action or intervention developed/adopted and implemented.
- **Summary and Segue**
 - Summarize the chapter, placing emphasis on action to address the selected problem/issue of leadership practice.
 - Provide a brief summary of the contents Chapter 2.

Chapter 2. Research Design

The purpose of this chapter is to present your research design. Sections headings (bold) include:

- **Introduction**
 - Briefly reintroduce problem of practice.
 - Provider the reader with a brief overview of what will be presented in this chapter.
- **Research Setting**
 - Provide a description of the research setting, the organizational collaborators involved in the study and the organizational context for the study.
 - Discuss the role of the research as a participant-leader, participant-researcher.
- Present the **Research Design**
 - Research purpose statement (follow general purpose script in Ivankova, 2015).
 - Present the overall aim of the study, goal, and design.
 - Expected outcomes of the study, study objectives, and research questions;
 - Present your **MMAR Framework** (follow MM Methodological Framework in AR in Ivankova, 2015).
 - **Methods and Procedures.**
 - Present your **MMAR approach**: explain the major characteristics and purposes of the approach, specify the stages of the process.
 - **MMAR Study Design**: describe your design in detail and for which stage you used your design; how you integrated data to make inferences; explain how this design suites your study purpose and questions.
 - Present your **participants**: the sampling scheme, criteria for selection, recruitment procedures and access and stakeholders role in sampling.

- Describe your **data collection**: how data were collected; type of data for each strand and rationale; discuss data sources and any data collection issues encountered; provide the timeframe for collection and how you organized and stored data.
- Describe your **data analysis**: how data were analyzed within the design; preparation of data; specific procedures to address study purpose and questions; discuss integration of data based on study design.
- **Action/Intervention**, the steps you took to implement the intervention.
- **Quality Assurance**
 - Discuss how you assessed the quality of your study and how evaluated the methodological rigor of each strand implemented.
- **Ethical Considerations**
 - Discuss ways in which you protected the participants in your study.
 - Address general ethical issues when conducting an action research study.

Chapter 3. Results, Recommendations and Reflection

- **Introduction**
 - Briefly reintroduce problem of practice.
 - Provide the reader with a brief overview of what will be presented in this chapter.
- **Results**
 - Provide a description and discussion of the results from each phase of the study (reconnaissance and evaluation).
- **Recommendations**
 - Provide specific recommendations for continued informed action (e.g., monitoring) to address the problem/issue of leadership practice in the organization.
- **Implications and Reflections**
 - Provide a discussion of the implications of the study's findings for organizational leadership practice and educational policy.
 - Provide a reflection on his or her role as participant-leader and participant-researcher while leading implementation of the action and completing the action research dissertation.
 - Provides a discussion of lessons learned for organizational leadership, leading organizational change, and conducting action research.

BACK MATTER

- **Appendices:**
 - Instruments
 - IRB approval
 - Additional supportive tables and figures
- **References**
 - Provide a complete reference section including complete references for all sources cited in the report. All references must be formatted according to APA style guidelines.
- **Vita**