

Chapter 29

A Research Dashboard for Aligning Research Components in Research Proposals, Theses, and Dissertations in Library and Information Science

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ABSTRACT

Alignment is important for harmoniously arranging, connecting, and linking research parts at different stages of research to produce logical, coherent, and clear relationships in, for example, a research proposal or report. Errors occur in many research proposals and research reports when the title, research problem, and research objectives or questions or hypotheses are not interrelated or linked to the theoretical framework and research methodology as a whole. This author uses related studies and several years of experience as a research supervisor and examiner of several master's and doctoral theses and dissertations in LIS in Africa to discuss this challenging factor. A conceptual model for an in-depth understanding of the constructs of research alignment for easy recognition, understanding, and application in LIS research proposals and reports is produced.. The chapter will support research proposal and research report writing in LIS and the cognate disciplines.

INTRODUCTION

The concept “alignment” has several definitions, dimensions, levels and challenges (Chan & Reich, 2007). The two authors refer to related terms such as fit, linkage, integration, coherence and harmony to define alignment. There are many types of alignment (eg strategic, social, structural, cultural, intellectual, internal vs external, mechanical). Broadly and closest definition to the focus of this chapter view alignment as “parts of something that are in the proper position relative to each other” (LoveToKnow Media, 2021).

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There have been several research publications dedicated to thesis and dissertation writing and its challenges (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Ekpoh, 2016; Haq & Shahzad, 2021), and those linked to publication errors (Ocholla, 2007), factors affecting the completion of doctoral work (Aina, 2015; Mouton, Boshoff & James, 2015), quantitative and qualitative aspects of doctoral education (Cloete & Mouton, 2015; Mouton, Boshoff, & James, 2015), experiences and strategies (Odena & Burgess, 2017), shortcomings of PhD thesis (Mutula & Majinge, 2017) and research proposal errors (Kaniki, 2000). As confirmed by searches made by this author in SCOPUS database from the last twenty years, much research and many publications seem to have been dedicated to writing theses and dissertations where several factors are considered (Ekpoh, 2016; Odena & Burgess, 2017) with emphasis on syntactic and semantic challenges. Except for a few studies (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Hoadley, 2004), aligning a research topic with a research problem, objectives/questions, theoretical frameworks, literature reviews, research methodology, findings, discussions, and conclusions does not seem to have received adequate attention. For example, Hoadley discusses alignment within methodology in relation to measurements, theories, treatments and interpretations, and points out that alignment ensures “that the research methods we use actually test what we think they are testing” (Hoadley, 2004, p. 1). It remains a common problem at research proposal and research reporting levels. This chapter discusses the alignment within the context of writing proposals, research master’s and doctoral theses and dissertations within a mixed research methodology from the supervisor’s and examiner’s perspectives. It provides a conceptual framework for dealing with the alignment by using the author’s experiential knowledge as a supervisor and examiner of several theses and dissertations in Africa.

In the chapter – as a working definition – alignment refers to the linking of different parts or elements of a research proposal, theses/dissertation for its coherence, harmony, consistency, readability, and better quality of scholarship. The components in question would normally include the title, research problem, research objectives, research questions, theoretical/conceptual framework, literature review, research methodology, research findings, discussions, conclusions, and recommendations. Experience has shown that if these components do not speak to one another or are not harmonised in a research proposal or theses or dissertation, or even in most scholarly publications, then the research output loses focus and direction. In a book chapter by Bloomberg and Volpe (2018), dedicated to the alignment of components and elements in a thesis or dissertation, the authors discuss alignment as a concept involving elements and components, methods and shortfalls and note its importance for a quality proposal, thesis or dissertation. In essence, alignment requirements also apply to scholarly publications for providing focus. Thus, research loses direction and creates problems for the researcher, supervisor, reviewer/examiner or editor of a publication if the output is mixed or jumbled up in parts or as a whole. In other words, the research proposal, theses and dissertation or the research/academic publication (e.g. journal articles, book chapters, conference papers, and books) elicit criticism.

There are several advantages linked to alignment in general and in particular from the perspective represented in Table 2. First, it enables mapping the components or elements of a proposal, thesis or dissertation and their links to enable coherence and better focus. As depicted in Table 2, it resembles an architectural design where parts of the house and their links with the whole house are mapped or represented. Second, it guides the aspirant/student and supervisor to ensure inclusivity and identify gaps in the arrangement, structure, and organisation. Third, examiners and reviewers find it easy to navigate through the proposal, thesis/dissertation to provide informed feedback on the quality of the research output when alignment problems are resolved. It also promotes lucid academic writing and publication.

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