

Structured Mentoring for Dissertation Proposal Development

A Community Service Model for Strengthening Research Capacity among Educators and Government Professionals

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ABSTRACT

Research competence is a critical requirement for doctoral students and professionals pursuing advanced academic qualifications. However, many doctoral candidates from diverse professional backgrounds experience challenges in developing structured dissertation proposals due to limited research experience, methodological understanding, and academic writing skills. This community service program aimed to strengthen participants' research capacity through a structured mentoring intervention conducted over two days on February 21–22, 2026. The participants included teachers, lecturers, and government professionals with diverse academic and professional backgrounds. The program utilized structured mentoring, guided practice, collaborative discussion, and iterative feedback. This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach using observation, proposal document analysis, and participant reflections. The conceptual framework was based on adult learning theory, experiential learning, and research capacity development models. The findings demonstrate significant improvements in research problem formulation, conceptual framework development, proposal structure, and research confidence. Participant diversity was identified as both a challenge and an opportunity for collaborative learning. Structured mentoring proved effective in strengthening research competence across heterogeneous participant groups. This community service model provides a scalable and effective framework for research capacity development and can be implemented by higher education institutions to support doctoral students and professional researchers.

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Introduction

Doctoral education represents the highest level of academic training and plays a fundamental role in producing researchers capable of contributing to scientific advancement and innovation. One of the most critical stages in doctoral education is developing a dissertation proposal that defines the research problem, theoretical framework, methodology, and expected contributions to knowledge. A well-developed dissertation proposal reflects the researcher's readiness to conduct independent scholarly inquiry and ensures research feasibility and rigor [1], [2].

However, many doctoral candidates and professionals encounter difficulties in developing dissertation proposals. These challenges include identifying research gaps, constructing conceptual frameworks, and selecting appropriate research methodologies. Such difficulties are particularly prevalent among professionals transitioning from practice-based roles to academic research environments [3], [4]. Without adequate mentoring and research training, many candidates struggle to produce high-quality proposals.

Mentoring has been widely recognized as one of the most effective strategies for improving research competence. Mentoring provides cognitive support, professional guidance, and emotional encouragement, enabling learners to develop research skills more effectively. Studies show that structured mentoring significantly improves doctoral completion rates, research competence, and academic confidence [5], [6]. Mentoring also facilitates knowledge transfer, critical thinking development, and academic identity formation [7], [8].

Research capacity-building programs play an essential role in supporting professionals pursuing doctoral studies. These programs provide structured learning opportunities that strengthen research knowledge, methodological competence, and academic writing skills. International organizations such as UNESCO and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development emphasize the importance of research capacity development in strengthening higher education quality and innovation systems.

Participants in doctoral programs increasingly come from diverse professional backgrounds, including educators, government officials, and industry professionals. While these

professionals bring valuable practical experience, they often lack formal training in research methodology and academic writing. This diversity creates both challenges and opportunities for mentoring and collaborative learning [9], [10].

Adult learning theory provides a theoretical foundation for mentoring-based capacity-building programs. Adult learners benefit from experiential learning, problem-centered approaches, and collaborative engagement. Experiential learning theory emphasizes the importance of reflection, feedback, and active participation in developing complex competencies such as research proposal development [11], [12].

Community service programs conducted by universities serve as effective platforms for research capacity development. These programs extend academic expertise to broader communities and support professional development through structured mentoring interventions. Community service aligns with the university's mission of knowledge dissemination and societal contribution [13], [14].

This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of a structured mentoring program conducted as a community service activity to strengthen dissertation proposal development competence among educators and government professionals.

Methods

A. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to evaluate the effectiveness of a dissertation proposal mentoring program conducted on February 21–22, 2026. The mentoring activity involved teachers, lecturers, and government professionals pursuing doctoral studies.
Data collection methods included:

- Direct observation during mentoring sessions
- Analysis of participants' dissertation proposal drafts
- Participant reflections and feedback
- Documentation of mentoring activities

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis focusing on competence development and proposal improvement.

B. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework (Fig 1) integrates adult learning theory, experiential learning theory, and research capacity-building models.



Fig. 1. The conceptual framework

The framework illustrates how structured mentoring facilitates research competence development. Participants enter the program with diverse educational and professional backgrounds. Structured mentoring provides guided learning, collaborative interaction, and feedback, enabling participants to develop essential research competencies. This model aligns with adult learning and experiential learning theories emphasizing active participation and reflective learning [11], [12], [15].

Results and Discussion

A. Participant Characteristics and Research Readiness

The mentoring program involved participants with diverse academic and professional backgrounds, including teachers, lecturers, and government professionals. This diversity significantly influenced participants' initial research competence and mentoring needs. Research shows that participants' educational background and professional experience influence their research readiness and learning needs [9], [16].

Participants from academic backgrounds demonstrated stronger theoretical knowledge, while professionals from government and practice-based fields demonstrated strong contextual understanding but required additional support in research methodology and theoretical framework development. Such diversity creates opportunities for collaborative learning and peer knowledge exchange [5], [8].

Structured mentoring allowed participants to share experiences, receive individualized feedback, and refine their research proposals. Mentoring programs are particularly effective when participants have diverse perspectives, as collaborative learning enhances critical thinking and research competence [6], [17].

Table 1. Participant Academic and Professional Characteristics

Category	Description	Mentoring Implication
Educational background	Education, social sciences, public administration	Requires differentiated mentoring
Professional roles	Teachers, lecturers, government employees	Varied research experience levels
Research experience	Beginner to intermediate	Needs individualized mentoring
Institutional affiliation	Schools, universities, government offices	Diverse research contexts
Research readiness	Mixed proposal development stages	Structured mentoring required

These findings confirm that participant diversity requires flexible and adaptive mentoring approaches to support effective research competence development [6], [18].

B. Improvement in Research Problem Formulation and Conceptual Framework

Participants initially faced challenges in defining clear research problems and conceptual frameworks. Many research topics were broad, lacked theoretical grounding, and did not clearly identify research gaps. This finding aligns with previous studies showing that research problem formulation is one of the most challenging aspects of doctoral education [3], [4].

Mentoring interventions helped participants refine research topics, identify research gaps, and develop theoretically grounded conceptual frameworks. Mentors provided structured guidance, feedback, and examples of high-quality research proposals. Feedback and guided practice significantly improve research competence and proposal quality [6], [15].

Collaborative discussions also enhanced participants' understanding of research design and theoretical relationships. Participants learned to align research questions with theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches. Experiential learning theory emphasizes the importance of learning through practice, reflection, and feedback [11], [12].

Table 2. Improvement in Research Problem and Conceptual Framework

Initial Condition	Mentoring Intervention	Outcome
Broad research topics	Guided topic refinement	Clear research focus
Weak theoretical foundation	Theory identification mentoring	Strong theoretical alignment
Unclear research gaps	Literature review guidance	Defined research gaps
Fragmented conceptual models	Framework development sessions	Coherent frameworks
Method misalignment	Method selection mentoring	Appropriate research design

The findings highlight the importance of guided academic support in strengthening participants' ability to conceptualize and structure their research ideas. These results

demonstrate that structured mentoring effectively improves research problem formulation and conceptual framework development [5], [16].

C. Improvement in Proposal Structure and Research Confidence

Participants showed significant improvement in proposal structure, methodological clarity, and academic writing. Initially, many participants lacked clear proposal organization and methodological alignment. Such challenges are common among doctoral candidates with limited research training [3], [19].

Mentoring sessions provided step-by-step guidance on structuring dissertation proposals, including introduction, literature review, methodology, and expected contributions. Participants received iterative feedback, allowing them to refine their proposals progressively. Iterative feedback is essential for developing research competence and academic writing skills [6], [12].

Participants also reported increased confidence in conducting research and completing their dissertations. Mentoring provides both academic guidance and emotional support, which are critical for doctoral success [7], [17].

Table 3. Improvement in Proposal Structure and Research Readiness

Initial Condition	Mentoring Intervention	Outcome
Poor proposal organization	Structured mentoring	Organized proposal structure
Methodological confusion	Method mentoring	Clear methodology
Weak academic writing	Writing feedback	Improved writing quality
Lack of research clarity	Individual mentoring	Clear research direction
Low research confidence	Continuous mentoring	Increased confidence

These findings confirm that structured mentoring significantly strengthens research competence and proposal quality [5], [6].

Conclusion

This community service mentoring program effectively strengthened dissertation proposal development competence among educators and government professionals. Participants demonstrated significant improvement in research problem formulation, conceptual framework development, proposal structure, and research confidence. Structured mentoring, collaborative learning, and iterative feedback proved essential in supporting research competence development. Participant diversity enriched collaborative learning and enhanced research perspectives. This mentoring model provides an effective framework for research capacity building and can be implemented by universities to support doctoral students and professionals. Future programs should incorporate extended mentoring duration and continuous support to further strengthen research competence. Additionally, integrating institutional support mechanisms and follow-up mentoring sessions can ensure sustained improvement in research

quality and academic productivity. This approach also contributes to strengthening the overall research culture and professional development within educational and governmental institutions.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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