



**THE DOCTOR OF  
PUBLIC HEALTH  
(DrPH):  
DISSERTATION  
PROPOSAL  
*POINTS TO  
CONSIDER*  
FOR STUDENTS AND  
SUPERVISORS**



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**\*See Also: The Doctor of Public Health Final Dissertation Proposal Points to Consider**

## **Purpose of the Document**

The thesis must be an independent piece of work on an applied research topic of significance to the practice of public health, within or outside of Canada. Completion of the thesis will demonstrate the student's ability to produce original applied research, or other advanced scholarship.

This document is intended to provide guidance to the student and supervisor in the preparation and approval of the DrPH thesis proposal. The Program Director is available to provide any clarifications for situations not covered in these points to consider.

The following guidance is derived, in large part, from other doctoral programs offered at the school. However, like other major academic institutions offering this professional doctorate, the DrPH thesis most often results in a different product than the traditional PhD, but maintains the same level of rigor, critical analysis, and peer review. The DrPH thesis will focus on generating new translational knowledge and creating value for a public health change. This contrasts with a PhD-equivalent, which most often has the focus on public health outcomes or applications of new methods.

The thesis should demonstrate the student's mastery of the skills and knowledge to lead or create meaningful change in programming or policy development or develop new methods or strategies to accomplish either of these two goals. While publication is not required, the thesis should be of publishable quality, and it is strongly encouraged.

## **1. Your Supervision**

All DrPH students will have an identified supervisor by the end of year 1 and supervisory committee by the end of year 2. Your primary supervisor is chosen from among the faculty members and must have *full SGS status*; status is detailed in faculty biographies. The supervisory committee will consist of the supervisor and two other members chosen among faculty members holding a graduate faculty appointment. If you seek to have committee members from the field (outside U of T), they will need to be eligible and obtain a graduate faculty (SGS) membership. The Program Director can assist with such requests.

The role of your thesis committees is to approve your thesis proposal and supervise the progress of your dissertation. Selection of your committee, with guidance from your primary supervisor, should be based on who will be most helpful in your research and writing journey. Students should meet with their thesis committee at a minimum of twice per year with most students meeting more frequently depending on the stage of the proposal (e.g. monthly). Students have the responsibility to schedule the meetings, take minutes, and seek signatory approval via *DrPH [Form 5 DrPH Supervisory Committee Meeting Report](#)*. This Form serves to document your interactions and alignment with your committee.

A *committee meeting* needs to be dedicated to a final review of your proposal and its approval by the supervisory committee. The student may elect to have one subject matter expert, external to Dalla Lana School of Public Health, review the proposal. This is not a requirement, but having a practicing Public Health professional to provide input may provide insights to the applicability of the work to realistic public health practice. The external expert can provide oral or written feedback but is not a voting member of the supervisory committee. Your supervisor may invite this expert to the approval meeting or consider written commentary.

In addition to your Supervisory Committee Report (Form 4), please attach the Thesis Proposal Form (Form 5) to be forwarded to the Program Director and the Graduate Office to be included in your student file.

## **2. Your Proposal**

The thesis proposal defense is a requirement for candidacy, should be completed by start of your third year, or earlier if possible.

The purpose of the proposal defense is to:

- Ensure that the proposed research will result in a successful DrPH dissertation.
- Strengthen the thesis question, theoretical framework, design, and methods through critical feedback.

- Ensure the work can be applied to a public health need or challenge
- Assess the student’s ability to conduct independent and original research.
- Assess the student’s knowledge base relevant to their thesis topic.
- Provide a formal approval to proceed with the dissertation research.

With support of a supervisory committee, the student will be required to develop a proposal for the Thesis. **The scope of your proposal is agreed upon between you and your supervisor.** For general guidance, the following provides a *basic framework* for your agreed proposal.

## **2.1 Format of Proposal:**

Proposals should be single-spaced with 1” margins and 12-point Arial/Calibri/Times New Roman/Cambria font. Any standard referencing style (e.g., Vancouver, APA, ASA) is acceptable so long as it is used consistently throughout the entire paper. As a guideline, proposals are expected to be 8-12 single-spaced pages in length, depending upon the research design (not including the title page, abstract, and reference list). Appendices, beyond those specifically noted below, should be kept to a minimum. The final length and scope should be agreed on by your Supervisor.

The proposal will normally include the elements described below, presented in whatever order is appropriate to the student’s project. Changes or additions to this format are possible where appropriate. The thesis supervisor(s) and committee members should support the students in interpreting these guidelines to best suit the nature of the student’s work.

**Title Page** – Student’s full name, proposed title of thesis, date, degree sought, department, university and names of the committee members.

**Abstract** – Include an abstract of 350 words, briefly introducing the problem/issue, summarizing the objectives of the proposed research, its practical public health significance, theoretical and methodological approaches, and the primary research design components.

## **2.2 Background (Part A) (Maximum 5 pages)**

### **2.2.1 Critical Review of Relevant Research**

- A critical, concise review of relevant high-quality research literature, including peer reviewed and grey literature as appropriate.

- A critical review evaluates the substantive content of existing research. If the research problem is theoretical or methodological in orientation, then the review should describe current theoretical or methodological approaches to the issue, as appropriate. In addition, to detailing the current state of knowledge about a problem/issue, it should point to areas overlooked or inadequately addressed by existing studies and discuss how the proposed research study will address these limitations and make a unique contribution to the literature and/or practice.

### **2.2.2 Problem Statement and Research Questions**

- A clear and concise statement of the research problem or issue. Drawing upon the literature review, indicate why this problem or issue is important (i.e., justification for the proposed research). The problem may be theoretical/methodological (e.g., a conceptual issue) and/or substantive (e.g., a particular health or health care) issue.
- The overall aim/objective of the thesis or central research question. Research hypotheses may be presented, if appropriate.

### **2.2.3 Theoretical Approach/Conceptual Framework(s)**

- An outline of the theory or conceptual model/framework(s) that will guide the proposed research.

## **2.3 Approach (Part B) (Maximum 10 pages)**

### **2.3.1 Methodology/Research Design**

- Describe and justify the study design.
- If a multi-study, multi-method, or mixed methods research design is proposed, the type, description and rationale for each study or method should be included, together with a discussion of how each study or method complements or relates to the others.
- Comment on the epistemological consistency and alignment between the research questions, theoretical approach, proposed design, and analytic techniques to be used.

### **2.3.2 Sampling, participant/case selection methods and recruitment**

- Provide a rationale for the method of sampling or selecting data, whether they be participants/cases, documents, or other forms (e.g., why a particular group and not another).

- Clearly state the inclusion/exclusion criteria for participants or data sources.
- Justify the proposed/anticipated sample size and its representativeness (where appropriate). For example, how many documents, interviews, focus groups will be consulted/undertaken and why? Where appropriate, provide a sample size calculation with proper referencing of the method(s) used in the calculation.
- Describe how/why the research participants will be recruited (in the case of primary data collection) or how secondary data, documentary and other evidence will be selected. Justify and demonstrate the feasibility of acquiring the anticipated data.

#### Data Collection/Production

- Describe the data collection/production procedures (e.g., surveys, interviews, documents) and provide draft copies of/excerpts from all tools/instruments (e.g., samples of questionnaire, interview guide, focus group guide, selection of written materials) in the Appendix.
- Discuss the appropriateness of the proposed data collection/production procedures to the research questions.
- Discuss the validation of measurement instruments, as appropriate (e.g., Have instruments been validated? How and with what results?)
- Where relevant, identify sources of bias (e.g., influence of interviewer, type of questions), how these are likely to affect the research, and where appropriate, means to reduce/address/account for them.

#### **2.3.3 Data Analysis**

- Describe the proposed data analysis procedures (e.g. statistical and/or qualitative analysis techniques), and any software to be used.
- Describe how the analysis procedures are consistent with the research questions, theoretical and methodological approach, design and data collection methods described elsewhere in the proposal.
- If appropriate, describe how different types of data will be combined.

### **2.3.4 Rigour**

- Describe and justify procedures for substantiating the rigour of the research process, which might include:
  - o Quantitative: validity, reliability, generalizability
  - o Qualitative: relevant concepts of rigour such as transferability, credibility, trustworthiness, meaningful coherence, authenticity
- Where relevant, discuss the researcher's positionality and how this will be accounted for in the process of conducting the research (e.g., use of reflexivity).

## **2.4 Ethical Considerations**

- Assess any ethical issues and challenges that relate to the study design, recruitment of participants, documents/records, analyses, and dissemination of findings, including any risks and benefits to participants. Discuss how these issues will be addressed, minimized and/or disclosed to participants, communities, etc.
- Students should review the Tri-Council Policy Statement -2, and ensure that all relevant chapters are addressed in this section. For example, in keeping with Chapter 9, students engaging in research with Indigenous peoples must indicate if a relationship has been established, and the input that Indigenous peoples/organizations will have in the research. Similarly, students proposing qualitative research should review Chapter 10 and discuss how they will address relevant ethical considerations.
- Discuss efforts to engage relevant communities ethically and meaningfully in the research. Where relevant, provide details of research partnerships and/or copies of any agreements reached to access data, participants/documents/records in the Appendix.
- Disclose any real or perceived conflicts of interest.

## **2.5 Other Elements**

### **2.5.1 Limitations**

- Provide a concise discussion of study limitations consistent with your research questions, theoretical approach and proposed design.



### **2.5.2 Anticipated Contributions to public health practice or policy?**

- Describe the significance of your study, including what you anticipate will be the major substantive, theoretical and/or methodological contributions, **with emphasis on application to public health practice**. Note the key stakeholders likely to be affected by these outcomes.
- Where relevant, briefly describe your proposed knowledge mobilization plan, i.e., how will your work facilitate real world impact on policy and society.

### **2.5.3 Feasibility**

- Where the work will have associated operating costs (e.g., for field work travel, data access fees, participant honoraria), briefly describe the available financial or infrastructure resources to support the project.
- Indicate the estimated time needed to complete the thesis. Include time to various milestones (e.g., time to obtain ethics approval; develop data collection instruments; recruit participants; collect data; analyze data; produce a draft of the thesis; defend). This can be included in the Appendix in the format of a draft workplan.

## **3.0 The Proposal Approval Meeting**

It is the responsibility of the student to prepare and arrange for the proposal meeting. A major responsibility of the student is to ensure adequate feedback on the proposal among committee members prior to the approval meeting.

Submission of draft proposal should allow sufficient time for supervisor feedback. As a guideline, students can request feedback from committee members at least one week in advance of the approval meeting. This is to give the student adequate time to incorporate their feedback.

As a rule, the thesis proposal should occur as early in year 3 as feasible but before the end of the Winter term.

DrPH Program Progress Report Chart (rev. 2024)

Requirements		Year 1 Months			Year 2 Months			Year 3 Months			Year 4 Months			
		Sep-Dec	Jan-Apr	May-Aug	Sep-Dec	Jan-Apr	May-Aug	Sep-Dec	Jan-Apr	May-Aug	Sep-Dec	Jan-Apr	May-Aug	
I	Core Courses													
	On-Campus Forum (Burst Weeks)													
	Methods Elective													
	Secure Supervisor													
	Applied Research Project													
II	Core Courses													
	On-Campus Forum (Burst Weeks)													
	Free Elective													
	Comprehensive Exam													
	Refine and Finalize Thesis Topic													
	Establish Supervisory Committee													
III	Thesis Proposal Approved													
	Ethics Approval													
	Elective 0.5 FCE													
	Intense Thesis Work													
	On-Campus Forum (Selected day; non-compulsory invitation)													
IV	Elective 0.5 FCE*													
	Thesis Completion/Defense													
	On-Campus Forum (Selected day; non-compulsory invitation)													

\*This timetable may vary for individual students based on their progress and planning.