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## A research note on the agile literature review approach (ALRA)-based dissertation project scoping (ADPS)

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### Abstract

*Dissertation project scoping (DPS) is a study topic in the research methods realm; meanwhile, the critical systems theorists also have useful conceptual contribution to the topic, especially via the boundary critique lens. This article examines the ideas from the two subject domains of research methods and critical systems thinking. It comes up with two models to add to the DPS topic in the context of the agile literature review approach (ALRA). The writer terms the topic the ALRA-based dissertation project scoping (ADPS). The two ADPS models, namely, the ADPS onion and the ADPS, together, constitute an organizing framework to comprehend ADPS.*

**Keywords:** agile literature review approach-based dissertation project scoping (ADPS), the agile literature review approach (ALRA), boundary critique, dissertation project scoping (DPS), the DPS advices, the ADPS creeps, the ADPS onion.

### INTRODUCTION

Setting a dissertation project scope properly is a well recognized yet weakly understood task in the subject of dissertation project study. An explicit project scope statement of a dissertation project is commonly required in the introductory chapter of a dissertation report. As

expected, the research methods literature<sup>1</sup> has covered the project scoping topic, though often in a roundabout way with attention on related issues such as research topics, aims and purposes (e.g., Saunders *et al.*, 2016 and Bryman and Bell, 2011). Nonetheless, this writer finds that quite many of his MBA students still have difficulties to do dissertation project scoping (DPS). This personal observation resonates with the reported phenomenon of students being “without adequate academic writing skills” (e.g., Ciampa and Wolfe (2019) on graduate education students). Meanwhile, critical systems theorists, e.g., Midgley, Munlo and Brown (1998) and Ulrich (2017), point to the need to more vigorously conduct boundary critique in problem-defining, which, among others, applied business research is much concerned with. In response to the existing concerns on project scoping (including the related problem-solving topic) theories and practices, and, in order to contribute to the theoretical development of a closely related research subject of the agile literature review approach (ALRA), this writer postulates a dissertation project scoping framework for the ALRA. This approach, called it ALRA-based dissertation project scoping (ADPS), is for students doing applied business research using the Agile Literature Review Approach (ALRA). The ALRA itself is a recently launched approach by the writer primarily for his Hong Kong MBA students doing applied business research dissertation projects (re: *The agile literature review group*). Specifically this article examines the topic of dissertation project scoping in the research methods and critical systems thinking literature before elucidating the ALRA-based dissertation project scoping (ADPS) thinking.

### **Some advice on dissertation project scoping (DPS) from the research methods and critical systems thinking literature**

When doing dissertation projects, there are a number of generic research project planning questions to consider, e.g., “getting to know what is expected of you by your institution”, “thinking about your research area”, “using your supervisor”, “managing time and resources” and “formulating suitable research questions” (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Regarding our chief topic here on dissertation project

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<sup>1</sup> The topic of dissertation project scoping has been mainly discussed in the social media domain; it has not caught the serious attention in the more authoritative academic community. Thus, it is difficult to find academic journal articles that examine this topic.

scope, it has been tersely described in a number of related ways as: the “size of your project in terms of substance”, “the amount of research you will need to undertake” (PGC – Post-Grad Collective, 2017), “the domain of your research” (Bnchs-stem-euler, 2017) and “the parameters under which the study will be operating.... .. and is closely connected to the framing of the problem” (Simon and Goes, 2011). Drawing on Abao (2018) and Dissertation angels (2018), the writer summarizes the following ten advices on dissertation project scoping (DPS) under two categories:

I. About the nature of DPS

*Advice 1:* Scoping should specify “the dissertation project focus”, understood as what the dissertation project intends to accomplish. An illustrative example is like this: “This study will focus on developing a web-based help desk system using a problem tracking technique for Postgraduate UUM-CAS department at UUM” (UK Essays.com, 2017). At the same time, scoping should also specify what not to accomplish.

*Advice 2:* Scoping should delimit study scope in terms of specific research design and literature review scope, such as survey sample size, time, geographical area and academic theories to use.

*Advice 3:* Scoping should offer reasons to justify advices 1 and 2.

*Advice 4:* Scoping should be made concrete and comprehensible by a set of specific research questions. This helps to clarify the scope nature in a specific case.

II. About the DPS exercise considerations

*Advice 5:* the number of research questions (re: advice 4) should be reasonable, most likely, at around 3; not more than 5 in most cases.

*Advice 6:* the DPS should address a few research gaps as identified by you, the researcher, in the academic literature.

*Advice 7:* the DPS should be established in a feasible way by heeding the time and other resource constraints of you, the researcher.

Switching to the critical systems thinking perspective, notably via the lens of boundary critique (Midgley, Munlo and Brown, 1998 and Ulrich, 2017), the DPS is recommended to heed the following critical systems thinking advices to promote more effective problem-defining:

*Advice 8:* the DPS should be aware that “both the meaning and the validity of professional propositions always depend on boundary

judgments as to what 'facts' (observations) and 'norms' (valuation standards) are to be considered relevant and what others are to be left out or considered less important" (Ulrich, 2017).

*Advice 9:* the DPS should be aware of the need "to access a diverse variety of stakeholder views in defining problems, and to 'sweep in' relevant information" (Midgley, Munlo and Brown, 1998).

*Advice 10:* the DPS should be aware of the systems improvement problem that "something that appears to be an improvement given a narrowly defined boundary may not be seen as an improvement at all if the boundaries are pushed out" (Midgley, Munlo and Brown, 1998).

The research methods field puts more stress on the desirability to "make it clear as possible what you will be studying and which factors are within the accepted range of your study" (Simon and Goes, 2011) while the critical systems thinking perspective endorses a critical and holistic reflection on scope boundary setting for problem-defining purpose. The advices from the research methods and critical systems thinking fields, together, go some way to develop dissertation project students' generic conceptual and critical comprehension on DPS. The problem-defining orientation of the critical systems thinking field is especially relevant to the case of applied business research, which is also very much managerial-problem-driven. On this applied business research field, the writer now takes up the second task of this article to postulate an organized way to comprehend the agile literature review approach (ALRA)-based dissertation project scoping (ADPS). It is essentially a project scoping framework within the encompassing agile literature review approach (ALRA)<sup>2</sup>.

### **A postulation of the ALRA-based dissertation project scoping (ADPS) thinking**

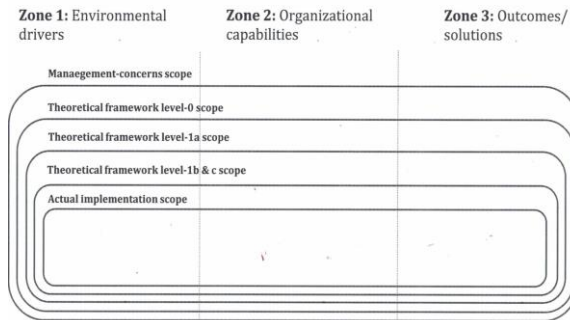
The ADPS organized thinking mode comprises two models, the **ADPS onion** and the dissertation project scoping (DPS) creeps (the **DPS creeps**). They are explained as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> The agile literature review approach (ALRA) is mainly employed in applied business research-type of dissertation project for MBA students.

The ADPS onion is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: the ADPS onion



Regarding Figure 1, the ADPS onion portrays an onion view of multiple layers of dissertation project scope for a dissertation project that employs the agile literature review approach (ALRA). Thus,

- (i) the project scope for management concerns (as depicted by the management-concerns diagram<sup>3</sup> in the ALRA), has the broadest scope for a dissertation project study; its discussion is very likely located in the chapter of Introduction of a dissertation report (re: .
- (ii) the theoretical framework level-0<sup>4</sup> scope, representing the researcher's intellectual response to the management concerns in the form an explicit commitment to a set of high-level research tasks, has a smaller scope than the management-concerns scope. This is because the researcher is not prepared to examine all the management-concerns items with explicit literature review and research methods efforts. Its discussion is very likely located in the chapter of Literature review of a dissertation report.
- (iii) the theoretical framework level-1a<sup>5</sup> scope is narrower than the theoretical framework level-0. This reflects the fact that the academic ideas gathered under theoretical framework-1a cannot theoretically cover the whole scope of all

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<sup>3</sup> The management-concerns diagram comprises a set of management concerns as identified by the researcher.

<sup>4</sup> The theoretical framework level-0 comprises a set of high-level research tasks.

<sup>5</sup> The theoretical framework level-1a comprises academic ideas grouped by a set of high-level research tasks.

the high-level research tasks of the theoretical framework level-0. Its discussion is located in the chapter of Literature review of a dissertation report.

(iv) the theoretical framework level-1b & c<sup>6</sup> portrays the research methods to be used in the dissertation project; it is reasonable to expect that the research methods to be employed (as also specified in the low-level research tasks of theoretical framework level-1b) are not going to apply all the identified academic ideas and research methods means (re: theoretical framework level-1a) in a full-fledged scale. Its discussion is located in the chapter of Research methods of a dissertation report.

(v) the last layer of the actual implementation scope<sup>7</sup> captures the following view: in the actual implementation of the research methods game plan (re: theoretical framework level-1c), the researcher, with various resource and cognitive constraints, is unlikely to make use of the chosen research methods in a full-fledged way. Its discussion is mainly located in the chapter of Findings and analysis of a dissertation report.

The ADPS onion does not include the ALRA concept of the core-focus-domain (CFD), as its scoping and location has been more clearly examined in the ALRA literature. Putting the core-focus-domain in the ADPS onion makes the onion diagram less easy to comprehend for readers. Nevertheless, it can be said that the core-focus-domain comprises a subset of items within the theoretical framework level-0, and, same as the ADPS onion, the core-focus-domain scoping also consists of a number of onion layers, namely, the management-concerns scope (CFD), the theoretical framework level-0 scope (CFD), the theoretical framework level-1a scope (CFD), the theoretical framework level-1b & c scope (CFD), and the actual implementation scope (CFD). More often than not, the location of the ADPS onion

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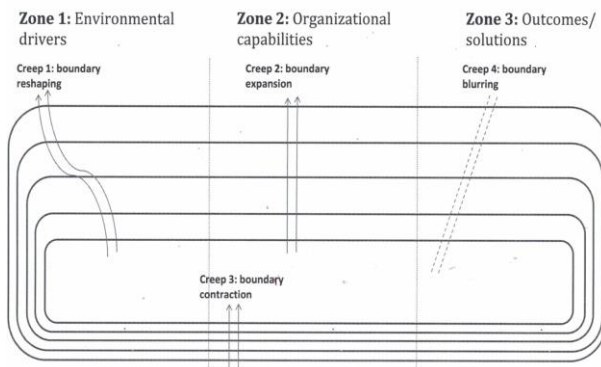
<sup>6</sup> The theoretical framework level-1b comprises a number of low-level research tasks, grouped by a set of high-level research tasks while the theoretical framework level-1c is made up of a number of research methods mapped onto the theoretical framework level-1a.

<sup>7</sup> The actual implementation scope comprises the amount of literature review and research methods works actually carried out by the researcher, in contrast to what he/she has promised in the theoretical framework set.

(CFD) is in Zone 2 (organizational capabilities) of the theoretical framework level-0.

The ADPS onion offers organized way to understand dissertation project scoping. It is also explicitly grounded on the agile literature review approach (ALRA). As such, readers are referred to the ALRA literature to learn more about the three zones of environmental drivers, organizational capabilities and outcomes/solutions, as well as the diagram series of the management-concerns diagram, the theoretical framework sets and the core-focus-domain. Having examined the ADPS onion, the writer now introduces the second organizing model: the ADPS creeps. Figure 2 depicts the ADPS creeps.

**Figure 2:** the ADPS creeps



Referring to Figure 2, there are four types of boundary creeps. Creep 1 (boundary reshaping) takes place when the researcher changes the numbers (with some items<sup>8</sup> additions and deductions) and the nature of some of the items in a few of the ALRA diagrams. Creep 2 (boundary expansion) occurs when the researcher introduces additional items in some of the ALRA diagrams. On the contrary, Creep 3 (boundary contraction) happens when the researcher reduces items in some of the ALRA diagrams. Lastly, creep 4 indicates shifts of items to inappropriate zones over time mainly due to the researcher's intellectual confusion on the research tasks and academic

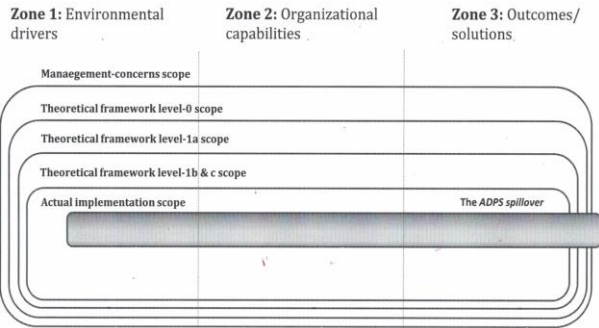
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<sup>8</sup> The items can be academic ideas, high-level research tasks and low-level research tasks, etc..

ideas used in the dissertation project. In this case, there could be an increase in ideas overlapping between items in a ALRA diagram, which is confusing for analysis purpose. Alternatively, it could signal more refined intellectual thinking on the researcher’s part if the relocation of items refines the quality of the ALRA diagrams. The consequence in this case is that, with items being shifted and revised, the relationships between some of the items in different zones become denser such that the boundaries separating them also become more porous. Again, it is not right to say that boundary blurring must represent deterioration in analytical quality of the ALRA diagrams involved.

A quite common dissertation quality problem is “*the ADPS spillover*”; this special case related to scoping is portrayed in Figure 3. It can be counted as ADPS creep 5. Figure 3 is shown as follows:

Figure 3: the ADPS spillover



Regarding Figure 3, it can be said that certain content of the actual implementation scope in the dissertation report has spilled over the promised theoretical frameworks’ boundaries. This implies that (i) the dissertation report content is disorganized and that (ii) the dissertation project is out of control. The *ADPS spillover* is a dissertation report quality defect. It mainly happens in the chapter of Findings and analysis of a dissertation report.

Together the five types of creep (re: Figures 2 and 3) constitute the organizing model of the ADPS creeps. It points to five deliberate ways to establish and, subsequently, to revise a dissertation project scope,



although ADPS creeping can also happen in the conduct of a dissertation project without the researcher's awareness. Unintended boundary creeps mainly arise from lax control on dissertation quality by the researcher. In a nutshell, it is too simplistic to say which type of creep is necessarily better than the other types of creep<sup>9</sup>. Regardless, it is useful that the researcher studies the literature on DPS to build up DPS intellectual strength which, in turn, improves his/her evaluation competence on his/her ADPS creeping practice. The knowledge from the literature in research methods and critical systems thinking, such as the 10 advices identified in this article, cannot be directly employed in the ADPS practice though generally they are quite compatible with the ALRA thinking. Researchers, being ALRA users, in this case, need to learn from the ALRA literature (re: *the agile literature review approach group*) to improve ADPS practice. As to the ADPS models offered here, they make up an organized thinking framework to examine the DPS tasks, without coming forward with specific ADPS advices. This is deemed unnecessary since such kind of DPS advices can be picked up from the ALRA literature itself (e.g., Ho, 2019)<sup>10</sup>.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

There are a number of considerations involved in the dissertation project scoping (DPS) practice. These are related to research methods scope, client system constraints, perceived environmental scanning scope, administrative dissertation project constraints, personal constraints of the researcher and the research focus that can be imagined by the stakeholders concerned, etc.. DPS is important to a student doing dissertation project since a quite logical line of reasoning can still be developed based on a narrowly defined<sup>11</sup> research scope (or in the case of applied business research, a narrowly defined managerial problem); inevitably, such reasoning remains highly defective and misleading in this case since it is full of

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<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, it is clear that the ADPS spillover (re: Figure 3) is clearly bad.

<sup>10</sup> It needs to be reminded that the ALRA guidelines from the writer for good research practices, including that of ADPS, are ultimately grounded on critical systems thinking. The underlying ALRA guideline endorsement is, in short, the promotion of creative holism in applied business research thinking and practice.

<sup>11</sup> Narrowly defining problem implies the existence of serious blind spots in problem-situation comprehension.

significant blind spots. As a result, the dissertation examiners' impression on the quality of the dissertation works will be quite negative<sup>12</sup>.

While, in most cases, dissertation project students are not required to write a lot on dissertation project scope in their dissertation reports, it does not mean that the DPS topic is straightforward or insignificant. This article makes some original intellectual contribution to the DPS topic by postulating the ADPS thinking in terms of the two models of the ADPS onion and the ADPS creeps. It offers an organized way to comprehend the topic of DPS in ALRA works. The limitation is that the discussion does not directly discuss how to make use of ADPS to enhance the practical and academic values of a dissertation project work. All in all, beside certain limited academic value, this article serves to guide students' ALRA practices in DPS for applied business research-type of dissertation project – this article thus has some practical value to these students.

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<sup>12</sup> As Ciampa and Wolfe (2019) remind us, "A dissertation is a text that is produced for assessment purposes".

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