A Guide to Writing a Doctoral Research Proposal

Introduction

The research proposal enables you to explain why you want to undertake a doctoral research degree. Its production is an integral part of the PhD application process and it will require a significant investment of time and effort. A strong research proposal demonstrates two very important skills both to you and to the institution to which you are applying:

 • That you have the capability to engage in independent critical thinking

• That you have the skills to communicate your ideas clearly.

Remember, do not attempt a topic that is too broad in scope. In order to be thorough and rigorous a PhD dissertation can only cover a fairly narrow focused topic. You should be aware that potential applicants often find that they need to narrow the scope of their intended area of study.

One of the most crucial defining marks of a successful PhD project is to make a significant and substantial contribution to the field of knowledge within which it falls. Therefore, it is essential to demonstrate how your proposed research topic will provide new knowledge and/or reinterpret existing ideas in an original way.

This short guide is intended to help you write a successful research proposal. To begin with, however, you should familiarise yourself with the Code of Practice for Research Degree Programme (PhD), especially the sections dealing with 'Selection, Admission and Induction Procedures' and 'Criteria for the Award of a PhD'.

Note that the responsibility for the choice and selection of research topic lies with the applicant rather than with a potential supervisor.

1. Planning the proposal

You should start thinking through the following:

• The important questions which are motivating you

• How your research will make an original contribution to your chosen field

• How you will provide new knowledge and/or reinterpret existing ideas in an original way

• The methodology you will adopt for the project

• What skills would be necessary in order to pursue study in this area e.g. what languages would be required

• What are the most important recent books or PhD dissertations that have been published in this field (UK PhD theses are listed in the British Library's EThOS repository and North American these are available on ProQuest)

• How the institution(s) can aid you in your research

• How you access the necessary resources for your research

2. Drafting your proposal

You should discuss your project with others who are working in your chosen field and begin to write down specific ideas about the project:

• Working title – make sure to use clear and concise language (this is likely to change but is an important starting point)

• Precise research questions that you know will need to be addressed

• The primary sources your research will engage with

• The methodology you will adopt in order to tackle your project and answer your research questions – show that you understand the theoretical and research issues relevant to this particular study

• Key interlocutors – show that you are aware of important issues, themes, and debates

• The boundaries and limitations of the study

• The original contribution you hope to be able to bring – the most important thing is to show why your research could create valuable and useful knowledge.

• The core bibliography – be discriminating about what is most relevant because quality is more important than quantity.

• Depending on your topic and methodology, there may be ethical implications to consider. For example, if you plan to conduct research involving interviews you will need approval from the college's Research Committee.

A strong proposal will set out all those things listed above. Excluding the bibliography, it should, probably, at this stage be around 1,500–2,000 words in length. It is important to demonstrate that you can write within a strict word limit. Remember to proofread your proposal and ensure that it is formatted according to a recognised academic style within your chosen field of study.

When you have drafted a proposal then you should try to get other people, your peers as well as those more experienced than you, to read it and comment. This will help you to revise and refine the proposal.

Keep the proposal document as objective as possible. Other more subjective and personal matters pertaining to your application may be set out in the letter of intent which is part of the application portfolio.

3. Contacting potential supervisors

Finding the right supervisor to mentor you in your project is one of the most important preliminary steps. Before you approach any potential supervisor(s) you will already need to have a clear idea of the actual research you hope to undertake. You will want them to read a draft of your proposal so that you can receive guidance and feedback prior to submitting your application. This process will involve significant work over a number of months. It is likely that your proposal will be redrafted and

refined during this process prior to application. You should also provide your supervisor with a sample of your academic writing. A master's dissertation is an ideal piece of work to share with your potential supervisor because it demonstrates your ability to produce a significant piece of written work