

## Guidance on Writing a PhD or Professional Doctorate Proposal

All applicants must submit a proposal of around 3000 words with their application. Potential supervisors and research degree co-ordinators use the research proposal to assess the quality and originality of your ideas, your skills in critical thinking and the feasibility of the research project. The quality of the proposal is one of the criteria that your application will be assessed on and so it is very important that you spend time developing a good proposal. Think very carefully about the scope of your research and be prepared to explain how you will complete it within the timeframe for a PhD or Professional Doctorate

Research proposals are also used to assess your expertise in the area in which you want to conduct research, your knowledge of the existing literature (and how your project will enhance it). Moreover, they are used to assess and assign appropriate supervision teams. We encourage applicants to contact the research degree co-ordinator for your subject area before you submit a formal application. They will be able to advise if there is supervisory capacity for your topic within the department and can put you in touch with a relevant academic in the department to discuss your topic ideas.

If you are accepted it is likely that you will substantially revise your original proposal following discussions with your supervisory team and you won't be committed to the details in the initial proposal. It is useful, therefore, to view your proposal as an initial outline rather than a summary of the 'final product'.

A PhD proposal is an outline of your proposed research and should:

- Define a clear aim and objectives for your research
- Demonstrate the originality or, in the case of professional doctorates, a contribution to professional practice
- Demonstrate your subject knowledge and refer to key academic literature
- Clearly outline how you will undertake the research with a rigorous *and discipline-specific* methodology

## **Structure of the Research Proposal**

The following elements should be included in your research proposal:

### **Title**

Your title should be concise and should clearly articulate the scope and key focus of your proposed research.

### **Introduction**

This should be a short section outlining the general subject area, the background of the research and specific aspects of the topic to be investigated. In this section you should also explain briefly your rationale (argument) for conducting the proposed research: why it is important to research this topic? You can also use this section to make links between your research and the existing strengths of the department to which you are applying. Visit appropriate websites to find out about existing research taking place in the department and how your project can complement this.

Be sure to establish a solid and convincing *framework* for your research in this section. This should include:

- research questions or hypotheses (usually, 1-3 should suffice) and the reason for asking them
- the major approach(es) you will take (conceptual, theoretical, empirical and normative, as appropriate) and rationale
- significance of the research (in terms of academic originality or contribution to professional practice)

**Aims and objectives** – the aim will express the overall intention of the research while the objectives will express the various elements of investigation necessary to achieve this aim.

### **Literature Review**

Your proposed research must be grounded in the relevant literature which you will incorporate in this section outlining relevant research, theory and practice already existing in the field, reviewed critically. The majority of sources should be peer-reviewed journal articles. You should identify key ideas and sources and relating these to the proposed research. It is also a good practice, especially when there is a lot of theory developed in your area of interest, to indicate what specific approach/theory/framework you are proposing to use/test/apply as a basis for your research. In general, the literature review should relate to core recent (or historically significant) work. It is not intended to be a comprehensive review of all relevant literature but should show that you are aware of what else is going on and can interpret it in relation to your own proposed research.

You are presenting a justification for doing your research. Thus it is essential to critically evaluate previous research and relevant theory, rather than just

describe it. For example, you may be arguing that there is a significant gap in knowledge, or that this is a new issue for practitioners where there is little known, or that previous research is out of date.

### **Research design & methodology**

This section should lay out, in clear terms, the way in which you will structure your research and the methods you will use. Research design should include (but is not limited to):

- The parameters of the research (ie the definition of the subject matter)
- A discussion of the overall approach (e.g. is it solely theoretical, or does it involve primary/empirical research) and your rationale for adopting this approach
- A brief discussion of the timeline for achieving this

Your proposal should include a concise discussion of your proposed research methodology (for example in the Law School, whether the topic is doctrinal or socio-legal; or in other areas of social science, whether the approach is qualitative or quantitative) methods and justify their selection of methods.

A well-considered methodology section is crucial, particularly if you intend to conduct significant empirical research. Be sure to include specific techniques, not just your general approach. This could include: kinds of resources consulted; methods for collecting and analyzing data; specific techniques (e.g. statistical analysis; semi-structured interviewing; participant observation); and (brief) rationale for adopting these methods.

You must also show how you will conduct the research realistically and feasibly within the timescales, constraints and context of the research.

### **Referencing and Writing Style**

A full reference list must be included with your proposal which should be formatted in Harvard style (or for proposals to the law School, OSCOLA). Your proposal will be submitted to the Turnitin plagiarism detection service and proposals which have not properly cited or fully acknowledged sources will be rejected. Your Research Proposal must be professionally presented. Professional presentation is part of convincing a reader and/or examiner that you have a professional approach to your work. You should adopt a formal writing style and use the third person (e.g. you can refer to yourself as the 'researcher').