How to write a PhD research degree proposal

What is a PhD proposal?
A research proposal is a project outline of around 1,500-2,000 words (excluding Working Title, Overview, Timescale and References) that you write as part of the process of applying to study for a PhD research degree. We use it to assess the quality and originality of your ideas, whether you are able to think critically and whether you have a grasp of the relevant literature. It also tells us about the perspectives you intend to take on your research area, and helps us to assess whether we can offer a suitable supervisor for your project.

We encourage you to identify a prospective supervisor in the Business School and consider how your research would fit the potential supervisor's interests and expertise before you submit it to us formally. At the application stage, what we are looking for is clear evidence of potential for successful PhD study and a proposal which reflects that. After students have started their research degree study, it is quite usual for them to refine their original proposal in light of detailed literature reviews, further consideration of research approaches as the research progresses, and comments received from the supervisors (and other academic staff).

Some things to bear in mind:

- Don't choose something too broad: your research must be achievable. Your project might feel like it's going to last a long time, especially if it is a part-time PhD, but be aware of how long different aspects of your research might take.
- You won't be able to answer every question about the topic, or look into every single aspect of a subject.
- Don't choose something vague: your proposal needs to be as defined as possible, as a proposal which is too vague will look like you haven't thought it through.
- Is there enough University expertise? Make sure there's somebody available to supervise your research. Don't propose to study a topic if there isn't a suitable supervisor within the School.
- Make sure you find it interesting: be sure to choose something you are interested in and passionate about. You'll spend an awful lot of time studying it, so you must be committed to the topic

The keys to writing a strong research proposal are to:

- clearly state and explain your research idea. This may take the form of a hypothesis or you may identify a more open-ended question or aim
- establish the relevance and value of the proposed research question or aim in the context of current academic thinking
- describe and evaluate the data or source material you need for your research
- outline a clear and practical methodology which enables you to address your research topic and to answer your research questions
- suggest what you sort of impact your research might have, and what new areas your work might open up
- demonstrate that your research will not take longer than four years full-time or seven years part-time for a PhD

- explain why you are qualified and capable of conducting the proposed research, and finally
- do the above in a concise, unambiguous and grammatical manner.

Tip - Proof reading: It is important that you carefully check your proposal for typographical and spelling errors, consistency of style, and accuracy of references, before submitting it. If these issues are not addressed, it is hard to have confidence in the proposal and it may be rejected straight away.

Also make sure that you identify direct quotations appropriately and do not include material that is unattributed. If there is material in the proposal that is copied from other sources and not referenced properly your proposal will not be passed on for consideration.

What should your PhD proposal contain?
It is best to structure your proposal as follows:

A working title – Your title should summarise the main idea of the proposal simply. It should direct attention explicitly to the central issue that you will address.

(Suggested Word Count: 15)

Overview of the research – In this short section you should provide a short overview of your research: the key issue(s) that you wish to investigate, and why these are important. You should state why you have chosen to apply to the University of Gloucestershire Business School. If you want to, you can refer to the research areas and priorities of a particular research grouping or supervisor.

(Suggested Word Count: 150-200)

Tip - Many PhD proposals are not taken forward because the issues they seek to address do not fit potential supervisors. So making sure your proposed research connects with staff research interests or ways of researching is a good starting point.

Ground your research in existing literature – It is unlikely that you can review all the relevant literature at this stage, but you should be able to reflect some major debates and issues in your proposed research area. It should also explain the academic context from which your research emerges.

In this part of the proposal, you should reference the most important texts related to your research; demonstrate your understanding of the research issues, and identify existing issues (both theoretical and practical) that your research is intended to address. A PhD is an original piece of research, so you should demonstrate that your proposed topic has not been studied before, or that you are taking a new perspective on an issue.

The important thing is to establish the extent to which your proposed thesis research makes a contribution - i.e., adds something theoretical, conceptual, methodological and/or empirical which is not already offered in this literature(s).

Increasingly applicants also outline the *impact* of their research studies. This can include both the impact on your research area, business and society in general. Considering these issues can add more value to your proposal.

This section should therefore introduce the issues that will be addressed by your research questions, and explain the importance of the research to others. In other words, it should establish the rationale for your proposed thesis, and should therefore proceed smoothly into Research Questions or Aims.

(Suggested Word Count: 550-700)

Tip – Many proposals are rejected because the literature review has not been taken seriously: there is little current material, limited evidence of criticality and a lack of focus and poor treatment of the conceptual issues. Use tools such as Google Scholar and Ethos.bl.uk to look at recent academic work and to see what other doctoral graduates have written.

Your research questions or aims – Provide a statement of your research question/aim, ideally in the form of a central over-arching question/aim and two or three sub-questions/aims.

(Suggested Word Count: 150-300)

Tip – Your research questions/aims can appear in any form, and certainly do not need to be expressed in the form of testable hypotheses. Do ensure however that they are sufficiently narrow – one of the reasons why many research degree applications are not successful is because the terrain outlined in the relevant proposal is simply too broad for a doctoral project. Please also remember that the research degree thesis is first and foremost an academic endeavour, not a consultancy or applied research project.

Research design, methodology– This section should identify the information or data that you will need in order to address the central issue of your research, how you are going to access the material and the possible research methods or techniques that you will use. You should also include some reflection on potential problems that you may face in the research process (access to interviews, primary material etc).

Here you should also include reflections on potential practical and empirical obstacles, conceptual/theoretical problems and difficulties, ethics, your own perspective on the issues at hand - and how these issues may impact on your studies.

(Suggested Word Count: 800-1,000)

Tip – One of the things all Schools look for in a potential postgraduate researcher is an awareness of some of the challenges they will face in progressing their proposed thesis project and of the extent to which these represent unavoidable limitations.

For empirical research studies: This section should outline the empirical work you plan to undertake. You may also want to refer to other exemplary empirical studies from which you have taken your inspiration.

You should identify the method or methods you propose to use, and justify these choices - i.e., explain why this method is being used in preference to others. You should also provide details of your proposed sample/s (numbers of participants and type of sample) or participant selection approach (selection criteria) and/or secondary data sets, and again offer justification for these choices. Further you should indicate how and why you will achieve empirical access, if this is a

pertinent issue. Finally you may also indicate the status of the data you will gather – e.g., to what extent will these data capture or mirror the 'reality' of the phenomena under examination? how objective can you as a researcher expect to be?, how will you approach intertextuality? and so on.

Tip – You will certainly need to refer to the literature on research methods. Please also be aware that another reason why many applicants are rejected at proposal stage is because they fail to offer sufficient detail of their proposed methodology, or indeed to defend the choices they have made, or to demonstrate any engagement with the relevant literature in this regard.

For theoretical research studies: For those applicants who wish to undertake theoretical research where neither primary nor secondary data will be used, the methods section above should be replaced with a section which explains exactly how the relevant theory will be cross-examined in order to answer the research questions.

Theoretical research typically involves an analysis of a chosen research issue/question which engages critically with appropriate theorists or theoretical traditions. You should explain what these traditions or theorists are and why they have been selected to address your research question.

Timescale – Provide a realistic time plan for completing your research degree study in, respectively, or three to four years full-time or four to seven six years part-time for a PhD.

Tip – Remember that activities can run concurrently and ensure you include any mandatory research training (this will be two modules to be taken in the first six months as a full-time student and in the first year as a part-time student). Ideally this timetable should be presented in three month segments.

References – A list of all works referred to in your proposal.

Tip – Quality is more important than quantity, demonstrate engagement with relevant literatures - both subject-specific and methodological - as appropriate.

The following books are widely available from bookshops and libraries and may help in preparing your research proposal (as well as in completing your research degree):

Bell, J (2010, 5th edn) Doing Your Research Project: A Guide for First-time Researchers in Education & Social Science, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Baxter, L, Hughes, C and Tight, M (2007, 3rd edn) How to Research, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Philips, E and Pugh, D (2005, 4th edn) How to get a PhD: A Handbook for Students and their Supervisors, Maidenhead: Open University Press.