

Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies

PhD research proposal guidance

Developing your outline research proposal

As part of your application you need to submit a research proposal indicating the area you would like to research. Don't worry if your ideas are not fully defined at this stage. If you are accepted onto the programme, your supervisors will provide help and support in refining your initial area of interest. It is almost certain that your original outline will be significantly amended in the early stages of your PhD. Your research proposal, however, is an important part of your application. It enables selectors to assess your knowledge of the proposed field of study and your ability to frame a project conceptually and propose an appropriate methodology.

Content of research proposal

Your proposal should be no more than **2,000 words** long and should include the following. Approximate word lengths for each element of the proposal are indicated in square brackets to guide you on the relative balance of these in the overall proposal.

1. Your name and the title of your thesis

2. The importance/context of your project [100 words]

Explain clearly why the project is worth pursuing. Is your interest a personal one? Have recent advances in the area made a previously unresolved problem solvable? Would resolving the problem you have identified help to answer some larger question? Does the issue that you would like to investigate have some urgent practical importance? Whatever the answer may be, it would be good to include some motivation for your project. Be concise.

3. A review of the literature [1000 words]

Provide a summary of some of the key relevant literature in the area. You do not need to give a long reference list. Instead summarize and critically appraise the key articles or books you regard as particularly relevant to your project. Explain how they relate to your proposal. Do they contain an argument or position you intend to critique or defend, or an idea that could help you to answer your question? This section of the proposal will give some indication of your ability to write critically and concisely and how you are able to balance different arguments in the literature.

4. The research question [50 words]

Your review of the literature and the context of your project should set up the rationale for why you want to research your topic and perhaps the gap in evidence. You should state clearly and precisely the question, or set of questions, that you intend to address. Research proposals – including successful ones – are almost always over-ambitious, but the more broad-ranging a proposal is, the harder it is to see how a coherent thesis might develop from it. So, do not be overambitious – be realistic with what you are going to be able to achieve within a 3 (or 6) year timeframe.

5. Methods [850]

The methods should set out your ideas for how you intend to go about answering your research question.

Methodology

We suggest that you start off by outlining your methodological approach. Link this if you can to the literature you have reviewed, and the data collection and analysis methods you plan to use. For instance, you may plan to take an ethnographic approach, or carry out an intervention study, or to capture objective data and subject them to statistical analysis. This section should explain why and how the approach you plan to use will fit your topic and the problem you are addressing.

Data collection/analysis

You should also outline in this section how you intend to go about collecting your data (for example by observation, interviews, a survey). You also need to describe the process you will use to analyse the data and whether it will involve using specialist software.

Access to participants/recruitment

Make sure you make some reference to how you intend to recruit your participants, whether there are likely to be any challenges and suggestions you have for overcoming these.

Ethics

Also include in this section reference to the ethical aspects to your study. What ethical issues does your research raise? Are human participants involved? How will you secure their consent and safeguard their confidentiality? Does the project involve risk? How will you mitigate this?

Timeline

At the end of this section please provide a proposed timeline for your study, illustrating the key activities. This could be presented diagrammatically.

6. References

List the publication details of all the works you have referenced in your proposal. Use a standard referencing format (e.g. Harvard or APA). This should help us to understand the literature with which you are familiar. Be accurate and precise in how you lay out the references. Your attention to detail will be something we will be considering as we review your proposal. The reference list is not included in the word count.

Additional information

As indicated above, your project will develop under the guidance of your supervisors. You are not committed to everything that you say in your proposal; only to producing the thesis that develops out of it. Please do not worry if you do not know exactly how your thesis will develop: you can signal areas you are uncertain about.

If you are awarded funding for your PhD from an external body, you may be requested to adapt your proposal in line with its requirements. Your supervisors will provide support and guidance in this event.