

PhD PROPOSAL GUIDANCE NOTES

When applying to the programme, you should prepare a Research Proposal that is between 3,000 and 4,000 words in total. Your proposal should clearly indicate the area of research and should demonstrate your ability to develop and execute a 3 year¹ or 5 year² programme of independent research. Your Research Proposal may contain the following elements. This structure is intended as a guide only, and should be adapted to the requirements of your proposed research where necessary:

1. Title

Your title should summarise the main idea of the proposal simply and, if possible, with style. You may want to use a title and a subtitle, separated by a colon.

2. Context

Explain the academic context from which your research emerges. This should involve a critical review of the existing literature(/s). The important thing to establish here is the extent to which your proposed thesis research makes a *contribution*; ie, adds something conceptual, methodological and/ or empirical which is not already offered in this literature(/s). This section should therefore introduce the issues that will be addressed by your research questions, and explain the importance of the research to others. It should proceed smoothly into section 3 below.

3. Research Questions

Provide a statement of your research question, ideally in the form of a central overarching question and two or three sub-questions. Your research questions can appear in any form, *and certainly do not need to be expressed in the form of testable hypotheses*. Do ensure however that your questions are sufficiently narrow – one of the reasons why many PhD 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 PhD thesis is first and foremost an academic endeavour. Second and relatedly, proposals that read like management consultancy projects designed to enhance the bottom line of commercial business in the global north will not be received favourably. However the School of Management is interested in projects which seek to enhance non-profit and voluntary sector practice.

4. Methods

This section should outline the empirical work you plan to undertake, if relevant. You should identify the method or methods you propose to use, and justify these choices (ie, explain why this method is being used in preference to others). You should also provide details of your proposed sample/s (numbers of respondents and type of sample) 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

¹ For full-time applicants

² For part-time applicants

a pertinent issue. Finally we would usually expect to see some indication of the status of the data you will gather – eg, 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?, and so on. In this section you may want to refer to other exemplary empirical studies from which you have taken your inspiration. 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.

4a. Theoretical projects

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.

5. Reflections

Here you should 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. One of the things we look for in a potential PhD student 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.

6. Conclusion

This should be a very brief wrap-up of your proposed thesis project, which summarizes its key contributions and how you intend to realize them.

7. References

A list of all works referred to in the text. Quality is more important than quantity, demonstrating engagement with relevant literatures, both subject-specific and methodological.