

Guidelines for writing a PhD/IPhD research proposal

If you are applying for a postgraduate MPhil/PhD programme, you will need to submit a research proposal with your application. The research proposal is crucial to your application because it forms the basis for making a judgement about your suitability for postgraduate research, particularly in relation to:

- the potential contribution to knowledge through original research or advanced scholarship;
- your knowledge of the literature: elements of understanding of a body of knowledge which is at the forefront of the field of study or area of professional practice;
- your theoretical understanding: some evidence of ability to conceptualise and apply theoretical resources;
- research methods and methodological appreciation: understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry;
- quality of the writing: potential to write at doctoral level (all candidates will have to meet the minimum English requirement for entry);
- your qualifications and experience: appropriate qualifications and/or experience which suggest potential to succeed with this study;
- the alignment of your proposed research with the interests and expertise of available supervisors and research centres.

Your proposal will be read by academics who will assess the proposal according to the above criteria as well as how closely the proposal follows the guidelines below. Preference will be given to candidates who are interested in researching topics identified as strategic priorities within our four research centres and/or those that align closely with individual interests of the team. It is therefore imperative that you think carefully about the content of your research proposal, as it will be closely considered by potential supervisors.

Writing the proposal

A postgraduate research proposal should:

- clearly define the topic that you are interested in studying
- show that you have begun to identify and develop an interesting and original research question in relation to your chosen topic
- explain your reasons for wanting to undertake this research

Your proposal should therefore demonstrate that you:

- understand your intended research area
- are able to identify an interesting and original research question

- have some understanding of how to conduct research
- have read some of the academic literature in the proposed field

You will probably need to write 5-6 pages (2,500 - 3,000 words) to be able to address the key components outlined in these guidelines. You should include a list of references.

What should a research proposal contain?

Ideally, a proposal should follow the traditional format for presenting and describing research ideas or projects, starting with an outline of the background or context of the research and knowledge of the literature; followed by consideration of the participants and methods you may wish to focus on; and then an assessment of why the research is important and how it could influence or impact areas such as educational theory, policy or practice. The sections should include the following:

1. Introduction and context

Introduce the proposal by **outlining the research topic** and its relevance to educational practice and/or policy; or theoretical/conceptual debates or foci; or relevant empirical applications or studies.

2. Knowledge of literature and theoretical understanding

The introduction and context should be followed by a concise (not exhaustive) **review of relevant literature** and **theories** relating to the research area. Be careful to reference any major lines of argument and/or published work of key researchers in your chosen field. It is important that you seek to identify a gap in existing literature and/or practice that your proposed research will aim to address.

3. Research methods & methodological appreciation

Although the specific methods of your research may change during the course of your studies it is important at this stage to provide a well-reasoned suggestion for how you could conduct research on your chosen topic. This should demonstrate to potential supervisors that you already have a good understanding of research methods and how they may be applied in particular or varied settings.

This section should therefore provide an **outline of the methods** that could be used and a **rationale for why these are best suited** to your area of research.

You need to clearly consider and justify the context of the research (e.g. geographical; educational sector i.e. primary/secondary/tertiary/university), as well as the participants (e.g. individuals; small groups; larger groups or classes), and any special considerations (e.g. access; particular ethical issues). In addition, it is helpful to

provide an idea of the anticipated duration and timeline of the study (taking into account whether you are applying for full- or part-time study).

4. Contribution to knowledge and impact

Clearly it is not possible at this stage to know what your findings will be but on the basis of the rationale you have provided about the background literature, gaps in the knowledge base and proposed methods, it should be possible to speculate about the ways in which your research will make a **contribution to knowledge**. This could be about influencing educational policy and/or practice, developing theoretical ideas or about equipping teachers/students/managers with particular skills.

Whatever your focus, you should seek to explain in this section what the potential **impact** of your research could be and **for whom**.

5. Qualifications and experience

You should take the opportunity to explain how your previous qualifications and experience relates to the topic and will help you to succeed with this study.

6. Information about you

Doctoral study is extremely rewarding for many people and also challenging; it is helpful for us to learn a little more about you; why you, why now, why here? You can include in your proposal a section to explain your motivations for wanting to pursue the doctorate generally, and also your topic specifically, and why this is the right time for you to be doing this. Completing a doctorate requires flexibility, openness, tenacity, commitment and interest and we would like to know that you feel prepared to tackle the challenge!

How should the proposal be presented?

You are applying for high-level study and so your proposal should be presented in a way that conveys your professionalism and academic ability; poorly presented proposals suggest that the application has not been considered carefully enough during the preparation stage. Reviewers will be paying close attention to the quality of your English writing and potential to produce work at doctoral level. Therefore, your proposal must be typed/word-processed; express your ideas in good, accurate English; be well structured, clear and legible; and include references in a standard academic format such as the Harvard system.

Finally...

Remember that the proposal is intended as a preliminary indication of your suitability for postgraduate research and so first impressions do matter. It is worth

dedicating time and effort to the proposal at this stage in order to stand a better chance of being accepted onto a research degree programme. Supervisors do not expect you to have all the answers or be fixed in your ideas at this point. We want to know about your ideas at this stage but we do know that these will develop and even change in the course of your studies.