

Note: the following is a guide to developing research proposals and does not guarantee admittance to the programme.

1. Introduction: What is a research proposal?

A research proposal provides an overview of your research agenda. It provides the reader with (a) an understanding of the key research question(s) (b) the context, background and relevance of the same (c) the current state of knowledge around the research area (i.e. theories and literature) (d) potential research methods that could address the research questions in a timely manner and (e) the anticipated contribution to current understanding in the field / professional practice. Note, it does not answer the research question as that forms the purpose of the research.

In essence, the research proposal clearly communicates what is to be researched, motivates and justifies the proposed research, explains how the research is to be undertaken and provides an indication of the usefulness of the results it generates to the field / professional practice.

It is important to note that the research proposal is an outline of the *intended* line of research and evolves as you become more familiar with the literature and theories around your research area over the course of the programme. Thus, you are not expected to conduct a comprehensive review of the outstanding literature / research associated with your research area nor confirm methodological approaches to resolving the research problem at this stage. However, you are expected to convey your *current* line of thought and knowledge around a given research issue / problem and potential approaches to analysing the same. To that end, a well written proposal:

- Showcases new and original lines of enquiry.
- Demonstrates critical and independent thinking.
- Shows a general understanding and knowledge of the subject and research area.
- Establishes the feasibility of the research.
- Shows good communication skills and an ability to articulate ideas and arguments.
- Is coherent and well-structured with well organised arguments and narratives.

Given that the proposal is a concise blueprint for the research to be undertaken, it should not exceed 1000 – 1400 words.

2. What information should a research proposal contain?

While there is no single format that research proposals follow, most have similar structures and encompass the following information:

(i) Title

This is the first thing that is read and is used to solicit academic interest in your research. The title should, thus, be clear, concise and reflect the proposed

research agenda. It should communicate what your research will be about. Think about key words that relate to your research topic to help you identify a concise working title for the proposal.

(ii) Research Department

Whilst some research areas align within single departments, there may be multiple disciplinary perspectives that can inform a research area. Thus, in the first instance, provide an indication of potential department(s) whose research profile aligns with / best fits with your proposed research agenda.

(iii) Research Context & Rationale

This section introduces the proposed research. You should, thus, provide the background to the research issue making sure to identify the broad research area. Explain and or define concepts / ideas related to your research.

You should also situate your research against the *some* of the existing literature and identify a relevant theoretical framework(s)¹. Whilst a detailed literature review is not required, some familiarity with the extant research and theories that relate to the proposed research is required. This informs the development of research themes / questions and ensures that new contributions can be generated via the proposed research. It also showcases an ability to critically analyse and synthesise existing findings.

Finally, and critically, the rationale / significance of the research should be clearly and objectively explained along with the anticipated contributions to the field.

Good introductions thus contextualise the research in a clear and interesting manner thereby demonstrating clarity of thought and depth of understanding around the research agenda. They are also concise, focussed and well structured.

Consider the following to help guide the development of this section:

- Detail the research context / provide a background introducing the reader to the research issue.
- Define key concepts.
- Provide a rationale to motivate the research – why is this an important subject to investigate?
- Explain why your proposed research is relevant.
- Discuss how your proposed research fits in / contrasts with existing literature and/or theories thus demonstrating a familiarity with the field.
- Explain the contribution your research will make to the field / professional practice.

¹ Some useful sites to source literature: google scholar, researchgate.

(iv) Research Questions

Having established the background and introduced the reader to the research issue and related research area, the proposal should clearly state the research question(s) that will be addressed. Put simply, what is it that you wish to investigate?

At this stage, research questions are often tentative in nature and will be refined as the research progresses. However, identifying preliminary research question(s) is critical to the development of a coherent research proposal as it situates the research within a broader research area and guides the choice of theoretical frameworks and methods. It also keeps the research manageable given programme duration.

(v) Research Methods

This section focuses on how you plan to conduct your research. You should thus demonstrate a familiarity with potential research approaches / methods (e.g. interviews, surveys, econometrics, target sample, time period of analysis, need for control groups or benchmarks) that can be used to help you answer your research question in a sound and robust manner.

(vi) Conclusion

The conclusion summarises the core information from the proposal, viz., the research focus and question, potential research methods and the expected contribution / output from the research.

(vii) Bibliography

Provide a brief bibliography of work that is relevant to your research and that informed your research proposal.

Finally, the following is a list of common mistakes when developing research proposals:

- Lacking a title to the proposal.
- Failing to contextualise / provide the background to the research issue.
- Failing to identify the research question(s).
- Lacking a clear structure to the narratives.
- Lacking focus, i.e. failing to keep narratives linked to the research question.
- Failing to establish the significance of the proposed work.
- Lacking / failing to convey a clear contribution to practice.

Bibliography

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