

The Research Proposal

An integral part of your application for any of our research degrees is the initial research proposal. It should outline the nature of your proposed study and give some indication of how you will conduct your research.

Students on PhD, DBA, MPhil and MSc by Research degrees complete their work under the personal supervision of a member or members of staff in the Business School. The success therefore of any research degree is largely dependant on the working relationship between the supervisor and the student. The selection of candidates for our research degrees programme is based on the nature of the research proposal, and whether or not we consider that the research would be of benefit to both the candidate and to the supervisor(s). Your research proposal is a major vehicle for you to communicate to us your area of research interest, and the way in which you propose to carry it out. We expect you to be able to demonstrate some understanding of the existing knowledge in your chosen area, and to show how you plan to carry-out your piece of research.

The outline proposal is not considered to be a final 'contract'. The field and the approach to the study may well change considerably in negotiation with your supervisor if you are admitted to a programme of study. The main purpose of this proposal is for the School to identify a possible supervisor, and for you to be able to indicate to the School that you have the ideas and knowledge to begin independent research and that you can explain and discuss your ideas coherently.

These guidelines will help you produce a meaningful research proposal. However, it must be stressed that following these guidelines does not guarantee an acceptance onto any of the programmes. Acceptance depends on several issues, including the nature of the research area, the quality of the ideas that have been generated, and the effectiveness of the proposal in communicating these ideas.

Although there is no set format or prescribed length for a research proposal, the following sections are considered and therefore should be addressed in your proposal:

1. The Research Topic

An introductory section, in which you discuss the general field of business administration from which your research is to be drawn, and in which you explain the particular domain on which you will focus. For example, the general field may be strategic management, and the particular domain may be managerial behavioural issues, which in turn may be narrowed down to managerial expectations. However the latter is also part of the organisational behaviour literature, so for this example you would need to explain which of these general fields you would be working from; indeed you may need to work from both.

You should also give some explanation as to why it is important to do this research (for example, a general lack of knowledge in the literature), and why it is of interest to you (for example, to realise your career aspirations). If you have any experience in this area of study you should outline it here. It is important that you give these issues some attention.

2. Review of the Literature

In this section you should demonstrate that you are already familiar with some of the literature relevant to your topic. You should outline existing knowledge within the area, making reference to some of the writers who have contributed to this knowledge. This should include conceptual, prescriptive, and empirical works. For the latter you should be able to show that you are aware of some of the previous research results that are appropriate to your research. It would also be useful to include an outline of wider literatures that may relate to your particular research domain.

3. Research Objectives

In this section you should explain what you are intending to achieve by conducting this research. These intentions should be derived from the existing body of knowledge, although there needs to be some originality in your research. Indeed the results of research degrees are meant to contribute to further understanding of the literature, and should be of publishable quality. There are several ways in which your research objectives can be established, as follows:

- 3.1. Hypotheses;** An assumed relationship between two or more variables. Several hypotheses may be established and the overall aim of the research would be to test the actual nature of these relationships with respect to the hypotheses.
- 3.2. Propositions;** Statements that explain likely phenomena that may be observed in reality, but which do not include assumed relationships. Again the overall aim would be to test the nature of these actual phenomena with respect to the propositions.
- 3.3. Objectives or Questions;** Objectives related to a set of aims or targets to be achieved through completion of the research programme. An alternative would be to pose the objectives as a set of research questions. Here the overall aim would be to satisfy the requirements of the objectives or to develop feasible answers to the questions.
- 3.4. Problems;** An unsatisfactory set of conditions will have been identified and explained in detail. The overall aim will be to find solutions to these conditions.

This section is extremely important, as in any research the establishment of one of the above represents the whole basis for completing the research programme. The value of the research is assessed in relation to the research objectives.

4. Research Strategy

This section should focus on how the research will be undertaken. Therefore the proposal should consider alternative methods of collecting data to either test the hypotheses or propositions, or to satisfy the objectives or questions, or to solve the problems. The proposal should also suggest which alternative will be the most appropriate.

Consideration will need to be given to both primary and secondary sources of data. For primary sources of data, the strategy can range from a census of the total population, to a sample of the population, to case studies of a few members of the population. These different strategies all have different purposes and will generate different types of data, and therefore it is important that you explain the strategy that you consider to be most appropriate to your research. For secondary data you must explain the sources that have been identified.

5. Anticipated Results

In this stage of the proposal there are two issues to consider; the type of results that could be expected and the ways in which data could be analysed. You should obviously not prejudge the conclusions of the research, but you must give consideration to the type of data that will be generated, and whether or not it is likely to satisfy the requirements of the research. Potential problems of data collection should be addressed, such as the difficulty in getting an acceptable response rate to a sample survey.

Some attention should also be given to the analysis of data. Will this be parametric or none parametric data or both? What kind of statistical tests are likely to be employed? Will tests of association, causation or difference be appropriate? We would expect that these ideas will change and develop as your research progresses, but would like to see that you are aware of the issues.

6. Schedule and Budget

This part of the proposal relates to resources. For research degrees, time is most certainly a resource and needs to be carefully planned. Therefore we would expect a schedule which shows the various stages of the research, along with the expected time periods for the completion of each stage. Similarly we would expect an outline budget of financial expenditure. This should only include direct expenditure associated with completing the research, such as data collection, and should exclude your living and subsistence expenses. If you are planning to complete the programme on a part-time basis you should also outline the amount of time per week you are able to devote to study, as well as the facilities available to you for the research.

7. References and Bibliography

In this section you should give details of all the references to the literature that you have used to prepare your proposal. The general rule is that the larger the number of references that you actually use in your proposal, the greater the opportunity to demonstrate your understanding of current knowledge in your chosen field.

There may be other works that you are aware of, but which you have not actually used in preparing the proposal. These should be merely listed as a bibliography.