

# How to Write a PhD Research Proposal

A crucial part of the PhD application is the research proposal. It is one of the key criteria that Salford Business School uses to differentiate between different applicants and to make decisions on whether to make offers of acceptance onto the doctoral programme. This page provides guidance on how to write a research proposal, with a few suggestions on what to include and what to avoid.

To begin with, in drawing up a research proposal, you need to make sure that the specialist area you wish to study is covered by a member(s) of academic staff within Salford Business School. You can do this by checking either individual staff profiles:

<http://www.salford.ac.uk/business-school/business-academics> or the main Research Centre's within the school: <http://www.salford.ac.uk/business-school/research>

## What is a PhD Proposal?

A PhD proposal is an outline of your proposed research that is designed to:

- Formulate and define a clear, interesting research question; this may take the form of a hypothesis to be tested, or a open-ended enquiry
- Establish the relevance and value of the proposed research question in the context of current academic thinking, highlighting its originality and significance
- Outline a clear and practical methodology which enables you to answer the research question, and to describe and evaluate any data or source material you will draw upon
- Suggest what you hope to discover at the end of your research and what new areas it might open up
- Provide a provisional timeline of your research

Generally speaking a PhD research proposal should be between 1,500 and 2,000 words in length (not counting abstract and references), which you write as part of the application process. Before making your final application is likely that you will need to revise your proposal several times so as to make sure that it is clearly written, well structured, presents a good review of existing literature, outlines the methodology to be used, and explains the significance of your proposed research.

## What is the PhD Research Proposal For?

Salford Business School's Director of Postgraduate Research and potential supervisors use research proposals to assess the quality and originality of your ideas, your skills in critical thinking and the feasibility of the research project.

Please bear in mind that PhD programmes are designed to be completed within three years (full-time), with an extra year for writing up if necessary. So you need to think carefully

about the scope of your research and be prepared to explain how you will complete it within the timeframe.

Research proposals are also used to assess your expertise in the area in which you want to conduct research, your knowledge of the existing literature and how your proposed project will enhance it. Moreover, they are used to assess and assign appropriate supervision teams.

We encourage you to identify a potential prospective supervisor and get in touch with them to discuss your proposal before making a formal application, to ensure it is of mutual interest and to gain input on the design, scope and feasibility of your project.

However, it is important to remember that we can make no guarantee in advance that your application will be accepted or that you will be supervised by a specific academic.

### **Structuring a PhD Research Proposal**

A generic PhD proposal structure could include:

- **Title Page** – a working title of your proposed research; this may not be the finalized title of your research project, but must show that you have thought through what you are hoping to achieve
- **Abstract** – a brief overview of the general area of study (approximately 300 words) summarizing what? why and how? you are proposing to undertake within the research
- **Literature Review** – you should develop your proposal to demonstrate that you are aware of the important issues, themes and debates in the relevant literature, identifying existing gaps (both theoretical and practical). You must refer to key articles and texts and briefly show that you understand how they are relevant to your research area. A PhD is an original piece of work and so you should demonstrate that your proposed area has not been studied before.
- **Key Research Questions** – in this section you need to outline the aims and objectives of the research. What are the key questions your research will be focusing on and seeking to answer? If you have a hypothesis, what is it?
- **Methodology** – you need to explain what methods of investigation you are planning to utilize within the research (whether quantitative or qualitative or both), providing some justification for why they are most appropriate, and the limits and potential you envisage
- **Timeline/Research Planning** – an outline of the timescale of the research, indicating how long different tasks are envisaged to take, and the sequence of the project in the time available
- **References** – you need to include a list of references to key articles and texts that are both cited within the research proposal and provided as a bibliography at the end of the proposal. Within the proposal you should utilize the Harvard referencing standard, with the author's last name followed by the year of publication in brackets, for example (Darlington, 2013); the bibliography should include the full reference stating the author, title, journal/book details, publisher, year and page numbers where relevant. Additional

information on how to reference can be found on the University of Salford Information Literacy website:

<http://www.informationliteracy.salford.ac.uk/resources/?resources=ref>

### Some Things to Bear in Mind

- **Don't choose something too broad:** your research must be achievable. Your project might feel like it's going to last a long time, especially if it is a PhD, but be aware of how long different aspects of your research might take. You won't be able to answer every question about the topic, or look into every single aspect of a subject.
- **Don't choose something vague:** your proposal needs to be as defined as possible, as a proposal which is too vague will look like you haven't thought it through.
- **Is there enough University expertise?** Make sure there's somebody available to supervise your research. Don't propose to study a topic if there isn't a suitable supervisor within the School/University!
- **Make sure you find it interesting:** be sure to choose something you are interested in and passionate about. You'll spend an awful lot of time studying it, so you must be committed to the topic.

### Submitting Your PhD Application

The main thing is not to worry if you find that your proposal is still not perfect - it is a proposal and during the first year of your study you will refine it and when it comes to the final submission it might be a totally different document, which is not uncommon. It is often the case that once you get into the area of research you will refine and re-focus your work in light of the feedback from the supervisor and others to whom you present your work as part of your research training – this would include seminar presentations, conferences etc.

Now that you have written your research proposal, you have to check that you have all the other necessary documents for your application.

Your application should include:

- Completion of the online application form with your personal details
- A detailed research proposal (applications will not be considered without this) which identifies your research focus, comments on existing literature on the subject, indicates your specific research questions and objectives, and the methods of investigation that you would utilise, and why further study in this area is needed.
- An English Language qualification (this must be dated within the last 24 months to ensure full compliance with the UK Border Agency's regulations) , international students should have an IELTS score of at least 6.5 overall (with at least a 6.0 in each category) or an internet-based TOEFL score of at least 93. Certificates need to be less than two years old on the date students start their postgraduate research programme.
- Certificate of graduation and academic transcripts

- Two academic references. These should be from academic lecturers under whose tutelage you would have been at some point during the duration of your postgraduate degree. The references must be signed and dated within the last 24 months and should be written with regard to your academic skills and your ability to successfully complete the PHD programme. The references will have to be sent from an official email address within the referees' institutions or on letter-headed paper bearing the institutions' names in order to verify their authenticity.
- A recent copy of your CV
- A personal statement
- A copy of your international passport
- Any other supporting documents that are specified on the application form

For information for prospective PhD students see: <http://www.pg.salford.ac.uk/applying>

For application details and the online application form see:  
<http://www.salford.ac.uk/study/postgraduate/applying/applying-for-research>

So apply now!