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 applicants and 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. Anyone wishing to apply for an MPhil should follow the process outlined below, albeit this is a 1 year project (with a second year for writing up if necessary).

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 individual staff profiles:
http://www.salford.ac.uk/business-school/business-academics

You can also look at the main Research Centre's within the school:
http://www.salford.ac.uk/business-school/research

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

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.

We prefer a PhD research proposal of between 2,000 and 2,000 words in length (not counting abstract and references). Before making your final application is likely that you will need to revise your proposal several times, to ensure 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. 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.

It is important to remember that a PhD is a 3 year project (plus 1 additional year for writing up if necessary) or in some cases (if accepted on a part-time basis) a 5 year project (plus 2 additional years for writing up if necessary).

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 you're 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 utilise 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.

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, 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!
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- **Make sure you find it interesting:** be sure to choose something you are truly interested in and passionate about. You'll spend an awful lot of time studying it, so you must be committed to the topic.