

# WRITING A PhD PROPOSAL

Dr Thérèse Callus, Director PGR Studies

## Criteria for the award of research degrees at Reading:

PhD candidates are expected to demonstrate each of the following:

- the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review to extend the forefront of their discipline, and to merit publication in an appropriate form;
- a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of the discipline or area of professional practice;
- the general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and the ability to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems;
- a comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship.

## What is a research proposal?

A research proposal is a concise, coherent and convincing outline of your proposed project that is designed to:

- Define a clear question and approach to answering it
- Highlight its originality and significance
- Explain how it adds to, develops (or challenges) existing literature in the field
- Persuade potential supervisors and/or funders of the importance of the work, why you are the right person to undertake it in that particular institution, and how you are prepared and capable for PhD level research.

## Content and Structure

A proposal should be between 1500-2000 words in length. It needs to be:

\*Concise

\* Clear

\*Convincing

**Title** – identify subject area and your approach or key question. A person who reads your title should immediately know what your project is about.

**Background and context** – current situation and debates, and where your project fits in (and fit with academic expertise at chosen institution; importance of doing it in UK if comparative).

Explain the issue you propose to deal with. It may be an important issue in law, policy, or practice. It may have political, economic or philosophical significance. This will provide a framework for exposing the problem or issue that you will deal with. This should be explained in lay terms – how would you describe the relevance of your project to an educated non-specialist at a dinner party?

**Literature review** - Outline the existing scholarship in the area. Explain how the existing literature addresses the issue which will be focus of your project. You should make reference to specific works in the area.

It may be helpful to identify and distinguish the way that different works (or groups of works) take different approaches to the issue. Having explained the state of the existing scholarship, you need to then explain what are the gaps or shortcomings in that existing scholarship. What has not yet been done? Or what has not been done adequately? Or is it that something has not been approached in a particular way?

Your review should refer to enough literature to make it clear that you are familiar with the major works in the field and with the works that are of specific relevance to the issue you are dealing with.

**Your main research question(s)** – clear, narrow. What are the objectives – why are you asking these questions? Perspective and purpose?

The question or aim should be quite obviously linked to the gap(s) or shortcoming(s) you have identified in your literature review.

Having identified a problem or issue that needs to be addressed (in your contextual background, coupled with your literature review), will lead you to articulate your research question which should reveal the purpose or objective of your study.

**Methodology** – choice of methods. Why a particular approach – why is it suitable to answer your question? You need to demonstrate an understanding of different research methods and perspectives.

What steps do I need to take to answer my research question(s)? Your proposal needs to convince that your methods will achieve the project's objective.

- Does the research require materials or documents which may be hard to access? Explain how you will go about obtaining those materials. Are there translation issues?
- Does the research require any particular skills that you already have or would need to develop in the course of the programme (eg, statistical analysis skills or a foreign language)?
- Are there any ethical concerns? Research involving human subjects will require approval by the University's Research Ethics Committee. This includes any research that uses surveys, focus groups or interviews.

**Significance of research and original contribution to knowledge** – what will your research add to the current position? This is a crucial element in a proposal. It justifies the project. A merely descriptive treatise of a current situation is not a PhD thesis.

Consider how, in the light of existing gaps in the literature your research will make a difference.

What is its likely impact and for whom? By answering your question(s), how will you make a difference to the state of knowledge in the field, or to policy, or to practice?

**Timeline** – The proposal needs to be realistic and achievable within three years' full-time study. Its scope must be sufficiently focused to achieve completion. Give an estimate of time-scale for each component identified in your methodology. Allow for identified (and unforeseen) difficulties, particularly regarding access to materials; obtaining empirical data; travel etc.. What you propose must be feasible and convincing.

**Bibliography** - Your work should be very thoroughly and carefully referenced. All references and citation should be complete, correct and consistent. The OSCOLA Fourth Edition is an excellent style guide: <http://www.law.ox.ac.uk/publications/oscola.php>

**Other considerations for funding applications (some of which should also be considered generally):**

- Does the funder require a particular focus or theme to be addressed?
- Can you justify the choice of potential supervisor? What is their relevant experience? How does your research fit within existing themes or research groupings?
- Do you have specific experience/skills which supports your application – professional or other experience in the area of your proposal?
- What is the potential impact of the research on those outside of academia?
- Are you aware of compulsory and optional training opportunities at your chosen institution? Reading runs the Reading Researcher Development Programme (RRDP). More information is available here: <http://www.reading.ac.uk/graduateschool/skillstrainingprogramme/gs-skillhome.aspx>.