RESEARCH PROPOSAL GUIDANCE

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

What is a research proposal

A research proposal is a concise and coherent summary of your proposed research. It sets out the central issues or questions that you intend to address. It outlines the general area of study within which your research falls, referring to the current state of knowledge and any recent debates on the topic. It also demonstrates the originality of your proposed research.

The proposal is the most important document that you submit as part of the application process. It gives you an opportunity to demonstrate that you have the aptitude for graduate level research, for example, by demonstrating that you have the ability to communicate complex ideas clearly, concisely and critically. The proposal also helps us to match your research interest with an appropriate supervisor.

What should you include in the research proposal (maximum 1500 words)

Regardless of whether you are applying for the MPhil or PhD programmes, your research proposal should normally include the following information:

1. Title

This is just a tentative title for your intended research. You will be able to revise your title during the course of your research if you are accepted for admission.

Examples of the thesis titles of some of our current and recent research students can be seen on our

2. Abstract/Short Introduction

The proposal should include a concise statement of your intended research of no more than 100 words. This may be a couple of sentences setting out the problem that you want to examine or the central question that you wish to address.

3. Research Context

You should explain the broad background against which you will conduct your research. You should include a brief overview of the general area of study within which your proposed research falls, summarising the current state of knowledge and
recent debates on the topic. This will allow you to demonstrate a familiarity with the
relevant field as well as the ability to communicate clearly and concisely.

4. Research Questions/Problems

The proposal should set out the central aims and questions that will guide your
research. Before writing your proposal, you should take time to reflect on the key
questions that you are seeking to answer. Many research proposals are too broad,
so reflecting on your key research questions is a good way to make sure that your
project is sufficiently narrow and feasible (i.e. one that is likely to be completed with
the normal period for a MPhil or PhD degree).

You might find it helpful to prioritize one or two main questions, from which you can
then derive a number of secondary research questions. The proposal should also
explain your intended approach to answering the questions: will your approach be
empirical, doctrinal or theoretical etc?

5. Research Methods

The proposal should outline your research methods, explaining how you are going to
conduct your research. Your methods may include visiting particular libraries or
archives, field work or interviews.

Most research is library-based. If your proposed research is library-based, you
should explain where your key resources (e.g. law reports, journal articles) are
located (in the Law School’s library, Westlaw etc). If you plan to conduct field work or
collect empirical data, you should provide details about this (e.g. if you plan
interviews, who will you interview? How many interviews will you conduct? Will there
be problems of access?). This section should also explain how you are going to
analyse your research findings.

6. Timetable with milestones

7. Significance of Research

The proposal should demonstrate the originality of your intended research. You
should therefore explain why your research is important (for example, by explaining
how your research builds on and adds to the current state of knowledge in the field
or by setting out reasons why it is timely to research your proposed topic).

8. Bibliography

The proposal should include a short bibliography identifying the most relevant works
for your topic.
How long should the research proposal be?

For all studentships the proposal should be a maximum of 1500 words including bibliography. Please note if applying for a funding body studentship you should check the specific guidance criteria. as this varies and is usually shorter. AHRC and ESRC are 1500 words including bibliography.

Can comments be made on the proposal prior to submission?

We recognise that you are likely still developing your research topic. We therefore recommend that you contact a member of our staff with appropriate expertise to discuss your proposed research. If there is a good fit between your proposed research and our research strengths, we will give you advice on a draft of your research proposal before you make a formal application. For details of our staff and there areas of expertise please visit http://www.keele.ac.uk/humssr/humssresearchers/