

The research proposal: Centre for Applied Human Rights¹

Your research proposal will be carefully considered by the Centre's faculty. The main purposes of the proposal are (a) to allow the admissions team to check the feasibility and potential originality of the research; (b) to ensure that we are able to allocate each successful applicant to an appropriate supervisor; (c) to indicate the applicant's ability to write a clear, coherent and structured document. A clear and focused proposal is therefore a crucial part of the application, even though it is to be expected that the project will evolve and change over the period of the research. The proposal should be between 1500 and 2000 words (excluding bibliography). We strongly advise students to take into account our guidelines while preparing the proposal.

General remarks:

A student writing a proposal needs to keep in mind some fundamental questions. The preeminent question is how will the student's research enrich existing approaches in their chosen area of study, and what is the major contribution that the student is going to make? Why is this useful? In addition, the student should reflect carefully on *how* this contribution will be made. What methodology or theoretical framework will be employed? How much can be achieved within the time-scale of a PhD project? These key questions can be summarised in terms of *what*, *why*, and *how*.

Getting started:

1. **Title:** a working title should indicate the key words associated with your research, be consistent with the outline further developed, and give some idea of the original aspects of the project. For example, if the analysis will be comparative, this should be reflected in the title. The same applies if it is to be an historical analysis, or an economic analysis, for example. If one particular theoretical perspective will be tested and criticised, then this should be mentioned. There will of course be an opportunity to refine the title during the course of supervision.

2. **Introduction:** this section should briefly delimit the area of research, and identify the major issue, problem, or gap in knowledge which forms the background to your proposal, including any recent literature. What, in the simplest terms, will your research achieve? The introduction is akin to an Abstract or overview of the proposed research and its goals. It should be a short but effective summary which shows how deeply you have considered the issues fleshed out later in the proposal.

3. **Key research questions.** This is a particularly important aspect of the proposal, since a PhD is an original piece of research. You need to explain what issues you are addressing which have not been studied before, or not in the way that you intend to address them. One way of looking at this is to ask, what *problem* are you trying to resolve? Another is to ask, what new understanding are you trying to provide? You should consider what **justification** there is for research in this area (*why?*). Research questions are exactly that: *questions*, to which, through your doctoral research, you seek the answers. While it is acceptable to have (and to mention) working hypotheses, the

¹ This guide is very closely based upon a document created by the York Law School. We thank the YLS for their permission to use their document.

core of your research (and hence, of your proposal) should be an attempt to answer a question or cluster of interrelated questions.

4. Identify **existing literature**. A student needs to identify the main literature in the area and to demonstrate awareness of the major existing debates. Specific sources should be identified and cited. The purpose of this section is not to provide a detailed summary, but to identify the ways in which the applicant's research is able to make a contribution: what are the gaps? Which elements remain unresolved or untested? What new light remains to be shed? If you are dealing with a very new area of law, you should still include a section on the existing literature. The relevant literature may lie in related or adjacent fields. What does study of this new area bring to existing debates? Bear in mind that the area of study will be less new by the time the thesis is completed, and that it may even have been significantly changed by then. What will be the enduring contribution of your research? All literature cited should be fully referenced and included in the bibliography. This is an important demonstration of your research skills. The existing literature which you review can be located in a variety of places: academic journals, NGO reports, academic monographs (books), policy papers, Court decisions and so on. Your ability to locate the major pieces of the existing literature in your proposal will be a significant factor in the review of your application.

5. **Methodology**: what approach will you be taking to the research? What style of enquiry or research techniques will you be applying? The student should be aware of different methodological tools that could be used. He/she needs to explain why the chosen one is the most suitable for his/her research. For example, your research may be primarily library-based. If so, does it require access to specialist collections? Does it require access to comparative or historical materials? If empirical or fieldwork is planned, is this intended to be qualitative or quantitative? How will any data be analysed and used? You should give some thought to any ethical or safety issues that may arise in respect of fieldwork in particular.

6. **Outline of timescale for the research and preliminary table of contents**. Again, this will help the postgraduate admissions team to check the feasibility of the proposal. The schedule should attempt to break down the work required into manageable segments, which will often be based on sections of the thesis. It is important to include some slippage time as research often does not proceed entirely to plan. Be realistic: feasibility is one of the criteria applied in judging your proposal. It is also useful to include a draft table of contents indicating how you conceive your dissertation being organised.

7. **References cited and indicative bibliography**. This section does not count towards the word limit proposed above. The bibliography goes beyond cited work and includes literature that will be followed up or used in the research project.

8. **Related materials**. If, for example, you have had contact with organisations who may assist in accessing research materials, then it is appropriate to include evidence of this as supporting documentation or if you have previously researched the topic then it is appropriate to include a writing sample of the output of that research.