

Applying to study for a PhD

Writing your Research Proposal

A Vital Point to Consider Before You Start Writing your Proposal

A good research proposal is a vital element to your application for a PhD or PhD Professional, at the University of Lincoln. Consequently, you need to spend some time and effort to drafting the document, and if the proposal follows the guidance contained in these notes, your application is more likely to be successful. However, if your interest in the research topic you wish to study is not shared by a member of the supervisory team at Lincoln, it does not matter how good your research proposal is, we will not be able to provide you with the academic support and advice, that you will need to complete your doctoral thesis successfully. So, ***before you start to write the proposal***, have a look through the research interests of staff to see if there is anyone who shares your own research interest; if members of staff do not share your research interest, they are unlikely to be able to supervise you. If you think that there is a member of staff who shares your research interest, but you are not sure, then contact the lecturer concerned by email, and discuss your application with him/her. Research is a crucial element of the work of university academic staff, so most academics enjoy talking about their research, to potential PhD students. Once you know that there is someone on our doctoral supervisory team who shares your research interests, then you can start to draft your research proposal.

The Purpose of a PhD Research Proposal

All applicants to the doctoral programmes in the University are requested to write a short research proposal, in which they present and justify their proposed research ideas, and demonstrate how they intend to conduct their research. This proposal should demonstrate how you might make an original contribution to knowledge in your specific subject domain, as this is the requirement for the award of a doctorate. A PhD or PhD Professional (two separate but similar awards) are awarded for making an original contribution to academic knowledge in a specific subject domain. More comprehensively, the European Qualifications Framework indicates that the PhD involves: “knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study and at the interface between fields; the most advanced and specialised skills and techniques, including synthesis and evaluation, required to solve critical problems

in research and/or innovation and to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice; the demonstration of substantial authority, innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes at the forefront of work or study contexts including research”

Your overall objective in drafting the research proposal will be to demonstrate that you are proposing to undertake academic research which is: original; based on a critical appraisal of existing work in the field; adding to the existing body of academic knowledge; feasible within the degree’s time frame. The proposal should: describe the research problem you plan to address (via hypotheses or research questions); state why the research is important, timely or relevant; outline your research methods and the rationale for them. The research hypotheses (or questions) must be sufficiently specific and well-defined to enable you to demonstrate that you will be able to address them with the time allocated for the completion of doctoral research.

The nature of the research process is such that, even if you are offered a place on one of the School’s Doctoral Programmes, the research you actually undertake may differ in some respects from that outlined in your original research proposal, as you are likely to refine your research hypotheses and question, in the light of your literature review in the early stages of your doctoral studies. However, you will still be expected to stay within the broad research interests of the School and your supervisor(s), so it is rare for doctoral research to diverge radically from the original proposal without very good reason, e.g. unforeseen problems in collecting data, owing to security restrictions by national governments. For this reason, before you start your study, you need to ensure that you are genuinely interested in, and confident about, completing the research contained in your proposal.

The Content of the Research Proposal

There is no one “right” way to write a PhD research proposal. The different elements within the proposal may vary in accordance with the research questions you are pursuing, and the type of research methods you have chosen to adopt. In general, however, your research proposal should aim to cover the following points:

- The overall theme of your research topic, and why it is of interest to you.

- Why you believe that your research is worth doing, in terms of its contribution to knowledge and/or impact.
- The hypothesis(es) that you intend to test, or the research question(s) you intend to answer.
- A brief, selective and critical assessment of the relevant literature, reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of previous research findings: to demonstrate your thorough understanding of the main debates and issues in your chosen research area; and how your proposed research will add to the existing body of knowledge. Your grasp of the literature, and the main contemporary debates within it, will also provide the assessors of your proposal, with evidence as to how you have begun to prepare for your research. If you don't have access to academic journals and books, do your best to include as much information you can find on the web. We understand it is difficult for applicants who have not been a student for some time to get access to all the relevant literature. You can also draw on your own experience here, too.
- Your research methodology, (that is the models, methods, tools and tests, you intend to use) and why it is appropriate for testing your hypotheses, or answering your research questions. Clearly this section will vary significantly for empirical, as opposed to theoretical, research. For empirical research, you will need to say whether your research will be descriptive or exploratory, what data you will use and how you will measure, collect, collate and analyse it, what problems you may encounter and how you will overcome them, and whether you may require additional training, e.g. in statistics.
- Whether your research raises any ethical issues, and how these may be addressed. For example, if you are going to collect empirical data from primary schoolchildren to assess whether a new method of teaching is effective, you will need to get written consent from the children's parents for their participation in the study.
- A research plan which shows how you will be able to complete your research within the time allocated for your doctoral studies. Key stages within your research plan (which may overlap) are likely to include: refining the research proposal; literature review; developing the research methodology; fieldwork/data collection; data analysis; writing the final draft; final submission.
- Show how your research will fit within the established or developing specialist research areas of the staff of the School to which you are applying.

- If you have been in contact with a member of the academic staff of the School to discuss your research proposal (which can be very helpful to you), then you should say so, and give the names of the staff you have consulted.

When you have written the first full draft of your research proposal, read it through and try to critically assess whether or not you have successfully answered the following questions in a clear, concise and succinct manner:

- What is the research about?
- Why do you want to do it?
- Why do you believe you will be able to do it?
- Why is it important?
- What do you aim to achieve by completing it?
- Have you shown that you understand how your research will contribute to the conceptual understanding and /or knowledge of your topic, e.g. expand knowledge or theory, improve research design, or improve analysis?
- Have you explained how you plan to conduct the research, e.g. empirical or theoretical, qualitative and/or quantitative, will you use existing data/sources or collect your own, the tools you will use, e.g. modelling, surveys, interviews, observation, case studies?
- Is it clear how your research will fit within, and contribute to, the School's research profile?

It may be useful for you to give your draft to other people to read and comment on, and if you have access to a friendly academic, do ask them to read through your draft and comment on its academic credibility.

The Format of your Research Proposal

Whilst content is of primary importance, the format of your research proposal also needs attention:

- Make sure you put on the front sheet, your full name (both family and given names), the title of your proposed research topic, and the date

- You should aim to write around 1,500 – 2,000 words but no more than 2,500. However, the length of the proposal is less important than making sure that you say something about each of the main points above.
- Use 1.5 (one and a half) line spacing, at least font size 11 with a standard font (e.g. Arial or Times New Roman) and leave standard margins (2.5 cms) on the right and left sides, and at the top and foot of the pages. Number the pages, e.g. 1of 3 and include your name in a header or footer on each page.
- Use headings for each of the major sections and sub-headings where you think these are necessary.
- Avoid jargon, and use clear simple English, your proposal should be understandable to non-experts.
- Ensure your proposal is in good English, with correct grammar and spelling throughout.
- At the end of the proposal, include a properly referenced bibliography, listing in alphabetic order by the name of the author(s), all the books and papers you have referred to in the text.

Before you submit your proposal, it is a very good idea to have friends or members of your family to read through your draft proposal to make sure it reads well, and to help you find any grammatical errors or spelling mistakes and typographical errors.

Personal Statements

As well as your research proposal, you may also provide a personal statement as part of your PhD application. If you decide that you wish to make a personal statement as a part of your application, then you should include the following (and anything else you may wish to mention, if you believe it is important):

- Why you want to study for a PhD.
- Why you want to study for a PhD at the University of Lincoln.
- Why you are a suitable candidate for the PhD programme at Lincoln, and in particular for their programme of study (e.g. quality and relevance of your academic credentials; any research experience you have; any research papers you have written, presented or had published; evidence of your ability to work on your own, accept supervision, handle a heavy work load, and manage your time; your ability to read and write in English to the standard required for postgraduate work).
- The reasons for your choice of research project, and why it is of interest to you.

- How your research and studying for a PhD fits in with your career plans.
- You should mention how you are intending to fund your research, e.g. whether you wish to be considered for all/some/specific funding options that the University may offer that you are eligible for, or that you have already some form of sponsorship.

The focus of a personal statement for a PhD application should be to communicate that you are committed to your research area and to doing a PhD, that you understand the level, quantity and type of work involved, and that you are equipped to complete an original piece of research, to a high academic standard within the required timescale. In short, you want the assessors to conclude that giving you a place on the PhD programme (and/or access to funds) will be a good investment of the University's time and resources.

What to do when you have finished your Proposal

Once you have finished your proposal, please submit it along with your application. Once the proposal is submitted, it will be used, along with other supporting documents such as your degree certificates, reports from your referees, and proof of your ability to converse and communicate in English, to make an assessment as to whether we wish to interview you. We will try to advise you as to whether you have been chosen for interview as soon as possible after receiving your proposal.

Selection for Interview

On the basis of your application (which will include your research proposal and may include a personal statement), assessors in the School may decide to offer you an interview, either in person (if you are resident in the UK) or by video conferencing (Skype) or by telephone. The time and date of the interview will be agreed with you by the administrative staff within the School. To help you prepare for your interview, we can advise you that during the interview you are likely to be asked some general questions including:

- What were the reasons why you decided to choose this topic?
- How does the proposed research proposal build on your previous studies – such as your MA thesis?
- Have you carried out the appropriate background reading?
- Do you have an up-to-date and accurate view of the research field?
- Have you outlined the focus of your studies in sufficient detail?
- Is the scope of your proposed research study realistic in the time allocated?
- Is your proposed research sufficiently original and challenging?
- Will your research allow you to demonstrate your academic ability?
- Will the research enable you to develop and refine your academic and personal skills?
- Are your proposed research methods appropriate to your study, and are you aware of their limitations?
- Will you be able to gain access to all the resources you need to complete your study?
- Does your research raise any ethical issues, and if so, how will you deal with them?
- Is the proposed structure of your dissertation or project readily apparent and understandable?
- Will your proposed dissertation meet the requirements of the School and the University for doctoral work?
- Is your research likely to make a contribution to the existing knowledge in your field?
- Do you have the requisite English language qualifications for doctoral level?
- What are the reasons for you choosing to come to Lincoln to study for your PhD?
- Do you have sponsorship, to enable you to meet the costs of your study?