

Writing a proposal for research degree application - guidance notes

As part of your application for a place to study for a research degree at The University of Northampton you are asked to provide a research proposal. This proposal should be of around 1,000 words.

What is the purpose of the proposal?

- We can see that you have a realistic idea about what is involved in studying for a research degree
- We can judge whether the topic is feasible for a research degree
- We can be sure that we have staff within the University who will be able to supervise the topic you want to study

What are we not expecting?

At this stage we are not expecting that you have already undertaken the research or written the thesis. But we do not want you to drift into a research degree with a vague idea that you might like to research something in a wide subject area. Remember that although you will want to make a contribution to knowledge through research, a research degree is essentially research training. Do not try to write an over-elaborate document.

Structuring your proposal

You may wish to use the following sub-headings in your proposal (although these are not prescriptive):

- Project title
- Overview
- Key research questions
- Relevant literature
- Methodology
- Outcomes
- Timescale

Project title

This should provide the key words associated with the project. Avoid titles that are very broad (e.g. health care in the West Midlands) or very lengthy. Examples of project titles have included:

- Sustainable management of tannery hair waste through composting
- Viewpoints: The interpretation of anomalous experiences
- Occupational identity changes in later life
- Millennial and postmillennial London in British fiction

Overview

It is sensible to have an opening paragraph that summarises your proposed research. It will indicate the general area of study and may give a brief indication of why you think this research is timely. Part of this may briefly cover your own interest and experience in this area of study.

Key research questions

You should try to indicate what you think the key questions are that you will tackle. These may be expressed as aims and objectives but do not need to be.

Examples of overall research questions, which are often expressed as aims, have included:

- To explore how individuals in strategic leadership roles in the Muscat Municipality affect the delivery of large-scale projects
- To examine the potential of landfill sites to support pollinating insect assemblages
- Enable a deeper understanding of the processes of engaging in different occupations in later life.

Subsidiary research questions, which are often expressed as objectives, have included:

- Critically examine the strategic leadership literature in the delivery of large-scale projects
- Determine how the plant assemblage is being affected by the landfill site in terms of plant growth, phenology and pollen production through field data
- Use a survey questionnaire to determine whether changes to occupational identity occur in later life

For any research degree it is important that you can make an original contribution through your own independent research. For an MPhil the scope of the research should be more limited than for a PhD and the project proposed should be more tightly constrained, but for both degrees the project needs to be do-able in the time allowed.

The important point is that the work that you are proposing is appropriate for the degree you intend to take and that the work can be completed in the time allowed by University regulations.

Relevant literature

You are not expected to know all the literature in your chosen field. However, you should discuss what you see as the important current debates and issues in your field. Refer to some of the key articles and texts and show you understand their relevance to your proposed research.

One of the features of your final thesis that examiners will look for is your ability to evaluate critically your own work and the work of others.

Methodology

Give some indication of how you intend to go about the research you are proposing. Refer briefly to methodological debates in your area or discuss specific techniques you intend to use. Do not try to describe what you will do in minute detail. At this stage you are only expected to indicate the approach that you think will be most appropriate.

Outcomes

In this section you should not anticipate the results of your research but you should be able to give an indication of how you think your work will move your subject area forward. Will it provide new information about a neglected area, or a new insight into an existing debate, or a new technique or procedure, or a development from existing knowledge? Your outcomes will probably reflect closely the key questions and the aims you have set.

Timescale

It would be helpful to have some outline of how long you intend to take over the degree and a brief plan of how this time will be divided between key tasks such as reviewing literature, collecting information or data, analysis and writing up.