

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM
BIRMINGHAM BUSINESS SCHOOL

GUIDELINES FOR PREPARING A PhD RESEARCH PROPOSAL

PhD degrees are by research only, with candidates completing their work under the personal supervision of a member of staff of the Business School. Therefore the success of any research degree is largely dependant on the working relationship of these two people. Our selection of people for our research degrees programme is based on the nature of the research that they propose to us, and whether or not we consider that the research would be of benefit to both the candidate and to the supervisor. Therefore your research proposal is a major vehicle for you to communicate to us your area of research interest, and the way in which you propose to carry it out. We expect you to be able to demonstrate some understanding of the existing knowledge in your chosen area, and to show how you plan to carry-out your piece of research.

The aim of this set of guidelines is to provide you with some help towards producing a meaningful research proposal. However it must be stressed that following these guidelines does not guarantee an acceptance onto either programme. Acceptance depends on several issues, including the nature of the research area, the quality of the ideas that have been generated, and the effectiveness of the proposal in communicating these ideas.

Although there is no set format or prescribed length for a research proposal, the following sections are considered in these guidelines and therefore they should be addressed in your proposal:

The research Topic; A review of the literature; Research objectives; Research Strategy; Anticipated results; Schedule and budget; References and bibliography.

1. The Research Topic

This should be an introductory section, in which you discuss the general field of business administration from which your research is to be drawn, and in which you explain the particular domain on which you will focus. For example, the general field may be strategic management, and the particular domain may be managerial behavioural issues, which in turn may be narrowed down to managerial expectations. However the latter is also part of the organizational behaviour literature, so for this example you would need to explain which of these general fields you would be working from; indeed you may need to work from both.

You should also give some explanation as to why it is important to do this research and why it is of interest to you. The former reason may be because of a general lack of knowledge in the literature, whereas the latter may be

related to career aspirations. However it is important that you give these issues some attention and that you justify the reasons for your planned research.

2. Review of the Literature

In this section you must be able to demonstrate that you are already familiar with some of the literature relevant to your topic. Here you should outline existing knowledge within the area, making reference to some of the writers who have contributed to this knowledge. This should include conceptual, prescriptive, and empirical works. For the latter you should be able to show that you are aware of some of the previous research results of others that are appropriate to your research. Also, it would be useful to include an outline of wider literatures that may relate to your particular research domain.

3. Research Objectives

In this section you should explain what you are intending to achieve by doing this research. These intentions should be derived from the existing body of knowledge, although there needs to be some originality in your research. Indeed the results of research degrees are meant to contribute to further understanding of the literature, and should be of publishable quality. There are several ways in which your research objectives can be established, as follows:

3.1. Hypotheses; an hypothesis is an assumed relationship between two or more variables. Several hypotheses may be established and the overall aim of the research would be to test the actual nature of these relationships with respect to the hypotheses.

3.2. Propositions; these are statements that explain likely phenomena that may be observed in reality, but which do not include assumed relationships. Again the overall aim would be to test the nature of these actual phenomena with respect to the propositions.

3.3. Objectives or Questions; if the former approach is taken the basis of research is a set of aims or targets to be achieved through completion of the research programme. An alternative would be to pose the objectives as a set of research questions. Here the overall aim would be to satisfy the requirements of the objectives or to develop feasible answers to the questions.

3.4. Problems; here an unsatisfactory set of conditions will have been identified and explained in detail. The overall aim will be to find solutions to these conditions.

This section is extremely important as in any research the establishment of one of the above represents the whole basis for completing the research programme. Also, at the end of the research its value is assessed with respect to this basis.

4. Research Strategy

Here attention diverts away from the 'what' of the research to how it will be completed. Therefore the proposal should consider alternative methods of collecting data to either test the hypotheses or propositions, or to satisfy the objectives or questions, or to solve the problems. The proposal should also suggest which alternative will be the most appropriate.

Consideration will need to be given to both primary and secondary sources of data. For the former the strategy can range from a census of the total population, to a sample of the population, to case studies of a few members of the population. These different strategies all have different purposes and will generate different types of data, and therefore it is important that you explain the strategy that you consider to be most appropriate to your research. For secondary data you must explain the sources that have been identified, and/or other sources that are likely to exist but which have not been identified.

5. Anticipated Results

In this stage of the proposal there are two issues to consider; the type of results that could be expected and the ways in which data could be analysed. For the former you obviously must not prejudge the conclusions that will be arrived at the final stages of the research, but you must give consideration to the type of data that will be generated, and whether or not it is likely to satisfy the requirements of the research. Also, potential problems of data collection should be addressed, such as difficulty in getting an acceptable response rate to a sample survey.

Some attention should also be given to the analysis of data. Will this be parametric or none parametric data or both? What kind of statistical tests are likely to be employed? Will tests of association, causation or difference be appropriate? Here it is likely that those anticipated at this stage will not be exactly the same as those that will be finally employed. However the point is that again we would like to be made aware of your thinking at this stage.

6. Schedule and Budget

This part of the proposal is to do with resources. For research degrees time is most certainly a resource and needs to be carefully planned. Therefore we would expect a schedule which shows the various stages of the research, along with the expected time periods for the completion of each stage. Similarly we would expect an outline budget of financial expenditure. This should only include direct expenditure associated with completing the research, such as data collection, and should exclude your living and subsistence expenses.

7. References and Bibliography

In this section you should give details of all the references to the literature that you have used to prepare your proposal. Here the general rule is that the larger the number of references that you actually use in your proposal, the greater the opportunity to demonstrate your understanding of current

knowledge in your chosen field. However there may be other works that you are aware of, but which you have not actually used in preparing the proposal. These should be merely listed as a bibliography.

Guidelines Research Proposal, MHV, 6 June 2001