

Writing a Research Proposal

Choosing your topic

When choosing your topic, it is essential, that you consider the word-length and time limits of the MPhil/PhD. It is easy to over-estimate what can be achieved in the available time and within the available word constraints. You should seek to be realistic, and may wish to take advice as to what might be possible.

The fundamental requirement of the PhD is that you make an original contribution to knowledge in the field. That is, that you advance existing knowledge within the field in a manner that extends the forefront of the discipline. This does not mean that you must study something completely new, which has never been studied before (although you could do this). The requirement of originality can also be satisfied, for example, by studying something from a new perspective, or drawing it together with another area in a manner which has not previously been done.

Whatever subject you choose, you must ensure that your research is not too broad – either in terms of the breadth of the topic or, for comparative legal research, in terms of the number of jurisdictions to be compared - both the PhD and MPhil theses require engagement in critical analysis of the relevant law, as well as a demonstration of comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the field.

The most important personal consideration when selecting a topic for a PhD is that you have a genuine and keen interest in the field. Three years of full-time study, on a relatively narrow subject, will test even the greatest passion: it is essential that you are fully, personally committed to the subject of your research and motivated to see it through.

Examples of [current doctoral research](#) being carried out in the School of Law can be seen

Purpose of the proposal

To write a successful research proposal it is worth giving some consideration to the purpose of the proposal, which is essentially three-fold:

- (i) The proposal must demonstrate that the research project has the potential to be developed into an MPhil or PhD.
- (ii) The proposal allows the School of Law to determine whether we have the appropriate resources and expertise to supervise the research. (For instance, it is worth noting that we are generally unable to consider proposals which are entirely or principally concerned with the internal law of a country outside the United Kingdom). It may be necessary or helpful for students to discuss a proposed topic with potential supervisors in order to refine the precise topic area. Contact details of academic staff can be found on their personal staff web-pages. You are encouraged to be as specific as possible in your enquiries.

- (iii) Since the School of Law receives far more applications than it has places available, the proposal allows us to make a qualitative judgment which forms one factor in the decision whether to admit an applicant. The proposal should thus contain sufficient detail to allow a genuine academic evaluation of its merits to be made

Length of the proposal

In order that the proposal is sufficiently detailed to allow a genuine evaluation of its merits to be made, without being overly lengthy, it should be in the region of 2-3 A4 pages. The proposal should be carefully structured to include the detail indicated below: conciseness is valued.

Content of proposal

- **Working Title**
This is simply indicative, for the purposes of your proposal/application and will usually be subject to modification during the course of your research.
- **Research Context/Background – existing research in the field**
This section should provide a brief indication of the general area of your proposed research, identifying the subject matter of your research. You should give an indication of the current state of knowledge in this area/current approaches to its study and any particular contemporary questions/issues/developments
- **Aims of your research/ questions to be addressed**
This section is very important: you must set out clearly the purpose of your project and the specific research question(s) or hypothesis to be addressed. These should be set against the outline of the research context provided as above. Successfully achieving this will then enable you to identify the significance of your proposed research (the subject of the next section of the research proposal).
- Significance of your proposed research: how will it contribute to knowledge in the field?
In this crucial section you should make clear both:
 - (i) what it is that your research will do that has not been done before, i.e. the original contribution of your research
 - and
 - (ii) why this research should be done: i.e. why your research will be of interest/the imperative that it be carried out/what its impact or value is.
- **Methodology**

In this section you should indicate how you intend to carry out your research, for example, is it to be principally doctrinal analysis of case law, library based research or will your research require the collection and analysis of empirical data? Will you be employing comparative methodologies?

Relating to library based research, you should indicate the principal sources of literature, availability of and proposed access to necessary resources e.g. through Westlaw, Lexis-Nexis, the library itself. Will your research require a period of study in another country? How would you propose to organise such a stay?

With regard to empirical work you should provide details of the nature and extent of this work, including for example an indication of why this is appropriate, who you plan to interview, sample size etc.

You should be clear about whether you already possess all the necessary skills to carry out your research or whether you will need to acquire new skills and if so, how you propose to do so. You should also give an indication of any particular skills (e.g. language) which you possess which are relevant to carrying out or completing your research.

- **Timetable**

This should simply provide an indication of the principal tasks involved in carrying out the research and an approximate timeline for their completion. As a guide to timing, please note that within the first year most research students are expected to complete their literature review, and at some point between year 1 and 2, as part of the process of upgrading to PhD candidature, most research students will have completed one or two substantive draft chapters.

- **Indicative bibliography**

Note that the proposal, particularly the 'Research Context' section, should be fully referenced through the use of footnotes, including publication details of books articles etc.