

Guide to Writing Your Research Proposal

For Higher Degree by Research Applicants



All prospective Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students, except those applying to the Faculty of Sciences, are required to include a research proposal with their application to study at the University of Adelaide. To assist you in this task, please read the guidelines below before preparing your proposal on the template provided.

What is a research proposal?

A research proposal is a an outline of your proposed project that is designed to

- Define a clear question and approach to answering it
- Highlight its originality (Doctoral level only) and/or significance
- Explain how it adds to, develops (or challenges) existing literature in the field
- Persuade potential supervisors and/or funders of the importance of the work, and why you are the right person to undertake it

Research proposals may vary in length, but generally speaking, a proposal should be no more than 2,500 words, or 5 pages in length; 2-3 pages is normally sufficient.

What is the research proposal for?

Potential supervisors use research proposals to assess the quality and originality of your ideas, your skills in critical thinking and the feasibility of the research project. Please bear in mind that PhD programs are designed to be completed in three years (full time) or six years (part time) and Masters programs in two years (full time) or four years (part time). Think very carefully about the scope of your research and be prepared to explain how you will complete it within the relevant timeframe.

Research proposals are also used to assess your expertise in the area in which you want to conduct research, your knowledge of the existing literature (and how your project will enhance it). Moreover, they are used to assess and assign appropriate supervision teams. If

you are interested in the work of a particular potential supervisor – and especially if you have discussed your work with this person – be sure to mention this in your proposal.

BEFORE making a formal application, you should identify a prospective supervisor and get in touch with them to discuss your proposal informally, to ensure it is of mutual interest and to gain input on the design, scope and feasibility of your project.

Crucially, it is also an opportunity for you to communicate your passion in the subject area and to make a persuasive argument about what your project can accomplish. Although the proposal should include an outline, it is also an opportunity to establish the attention of readers and convince them of the importance of your project.

Is the research proposal ‘set in stone’?

No. Good PhD proposals evolve as the work progresses. It is normal for students to refine their original proposal in light of detailed literature reviews, further consideration of research approaches and comments received from the supervisors (and other academic staff). It is useful to view your proposal as an initial outline rather than a summary of the ‘final product’.

Structuring your Research Proposal

The following elements are crucial in a good research proposal. Each item aligns to a section in the research proposal template:

Title

This can change, but make sure to include important ‘key words’ that will relate your proposal to relevant potential supervisors, funding schemes and so on.

1. Project Summary

In this section you should provide a summary of your proposed research intelligible to a reader who is not a specialist in this field; summarize the aims, significance and expected outcomes of the research.

2. Project Details

Be sure to establish a solid and convincing framework for your research in this section. This should include the following sub-sections:

a) Research Questions

This section should explain the research question(s) (1-3 should suffice) and may include the hypothesis or problem to be addressed.

- The major approach(es) you will take (conceptual, theoretical, empirical and normative, as appropriate) and rationale
- Significance of the research (in academic and, if appropriate, other fields)

b) Aims/Objectives of the Project

What do you want to know, prove, demonstrate, analyse, test, investigate or examine? List your aims in a logical sequence, e.g.

The aim of this project is to:

- Provide an outline of a research proposal
- Enable a prospective student to prepare a research proposal

c) Significance/Contribution to the Discipline

In this section you should justify the project from a review of literature on the topic: discuss the texts which you believe are most important to the project, demonstrate your understanding of the research issues, and identify existing gaps in the literature that the research is intended to address. This section is intended to 'sign-post' and contextualise your research questions, not to provide a detailed analysis of existing debates.

You should also use this section to make links between your research and the existing strengths of the School/Discipline to which you are applying. Visit appropriate websites to find out about existing research taking place in the School and how your project can complement this.

d) Theoretical Framework and Methods

You do not need to have full details of the methods you will use to answer your research questions but you need to demonstrate that you have already given some thought about how you will do things.

The important thing is to anticipate the methods you will use to achieve the project aims and to show that your project is feasible in the time period available. If your proposal is too elaborate and not feasible within 3 or 4 years for a PhD or 1-2 years for a Masters, your application is likely to be unsuccessful.

Aim to address the following points:

- How do you anticipate you will achieve the project aims and what is your rationale for adopting this approach?
- What do you need (identify any special equipment, software or material)
- Can you access necessary data or expertise?
- Do you require particular resources?
- Are there barriers or pitfalls?
- Does the proposed project involve human ethics, animal ethics or safety implications?
- Will travel or fieldwork be required? If so: where to, how long and at what intervals?

4. Research Plan and Timeline (This section is not required by all Faculties)

Provide a monthly/quarterly outline of how you will complete the work within the time scheduled. A full-time PhD normally takes 3 years and a Masters degree 2 years. Part time qualifications can be expected to take 6 years (PhD) and 4 years (Masters).

5. References Cited/Bibliography of Planned Reading (no word limit applies) (This section is not required by all Faculties)

Your references should provide the reader with a good sense of your grasp on the literature and how you can contribute to it. Be sure to reference texts and resources that you think will play a large role in your analysis, in addition to your planned readings.

Possible Pitfalls

Sometimes, students who fit the minimum entrance criteria fail to be accepted as PhD candidates as a result of weaknesses in the research proposal. To avoid this, keep the following advice in mind:

- Make sure that your research idea, question or problem is clearly stated, persuasive and addresses a demonstrable gap in the existing literature;
- Make sure that you have researched the School(s)/Discipline(s) to which you are applying to ensure that there are staff interested in your subject area and available to supervise your project. As mentioned previously it is strongly advised that you contact potential supervisors in advance, and provide them with a polished version of your proposal for comment;
- Ensure that the proposal demonstrates an understanding of research methods and research approaches and is it clear that the research methods identified are appropriate to the research question(s) identified;

- Ensure that the scope of your project is reasonable, and remember that there are significant limits to the size and complexity of a project that can be completed and written up in three years (PhD)/ 2 years (Masters). The University will be assessing proposals not only for their intellectual ambition and significance, but also for the likelihood that the candidate can complete this project;
- Make sure that your passion for the subject matter shines through in the structure and arguments presented within your proposal. Remember that we may not be experts in your field – it is up to you to make your project and subject matter engaging to your readers!

Exemption from Completing a Research Proposal

With the exception of students who originate from a [country subject to UNSC sanctions](#), all prospective HDR students from the Faculty of Sciences are exempted from the requirement to complete a research proposal as part of the application for admission. The countries currently subject to sanctions are listed on the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)'s website at:

http://www.dfat.gov.au/un/unsc_sanctions/index.html

Both domestic and international students applying to the Faculties of Engineering, Computer and Mathematical Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences, Health Sciences and the Professions are required to submit a research proposal on the Research Proposal Template.

www.adelaide.edu.au/graduatecentre

Further Information

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