PREPARING A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

A GUIDE FOR HIGHER DEGREE RESEARCH STUDENTS

Before any research project begins, detailed plans are essential. Designing and planning a whole research project involves choosing a researchable, significant topic and preparing a well developed research proposal. Both of these activities need to be carried out under the guidance of your supervisor/s and the earlier this planning takes place in your candidature the better. During this time your supervisors will advise on methodological issues and reading material that will help you to refine your research project. Ultimately, a good proposal serves as a valuable direction finder that helps the researcher to get going on their project with more confidence.

After admission to candidature, you as a higher degree research student are required to refine your preliminary research proposal and present for approval a more detailed proposal. This will occur within the first six months of candidature for full-time students and within twelve months for part-time students, either preceding or as part of your Confirmation of Candidature, a process which ensures that only research studies that meet the rigor required will be allowed to proceed. Choosing and developing a researchable topic and securing a tight fit between methodological framework and nature of the problem to be researched involves a high level of conceptualisation. Discussions and negotiations between you and you supervisor at this stage are therefore of vital importance.

A research proposal should be viewed as more than the outcome of a formalised procedure. It tests in particular your ability as a researcher to conceptualise clearly and to plan and organise carefully and thoroughly. It must be done well in order to do justice to the research idea, and to 'sell' the idea. It needs to be kept in mind however, that your plan need not be rigidly adhered to as opportunities to refine your topic arise, unforeseen circumstances come your way or if unexpected data or sources of data arise. The importance is to have a clear sense of direction right from the start.

Developing your topic

The purpose, structure and format of a proposal will depend on the disciplinary area in which the proposed research is located. Proposals vary considerably in format and length but around 3,000 words would be desirable for proposals in the social sciences and humanities and less so for many of the experimental sciences. While a proposal format is fairly standard for quantitative studies, for qualitative studies there is no one set format. However, some basic principles guiding preparation of a good research proposal are worth noting.

First, the topic chosen must be of some significance in your field of interest. In other words, the topic must be justifiably well worth researching. Next and importantly, two principles guiding the choice of topic which are elaborated below are **interest** and **feasibility**. Examine carefully the following to determine to what extent your chosen topic meets the criteria:

1. **It must be interesting to you**. It takes great interest in a topic to sustain enthusiasm and enjoyment, and hundreds of hours of effort. There must also be some excitement about the topic. It may or may not be relevant to your current work position but if it is, more interest may ensue.

2. **It must be feasible in the time allocated**. Do you, for instance, have the time and human resources to pursue this topic? If you live, say, in a city, plans to carry out a study requiring

extensive fieldwork in rural areas may not be practical (depending on how much time could be spent traveling and costs involved). Family considerations are also important to consider.

3. **It must fit within financial and other resource constraints**. A clearly laid out budget in the proposal should indicate what costs will be involved. Other resources (e.g. technical, statistical and analytical skills) required to complete the project, should be clearly indicated.

4. **It must be within your competence**. Familiarity with an issue or phenomenon, and some background in appropriate research methods, should, at the very least, save time and give you a greater sense of direction and confidence. If you strongly wish to pursue a topic that requires expertise you do not possess, plan additional work time and, perhaps take relevant course units to acquire those skills.

5. **It must be sufficiently delimited**. Setting realistic boundaries helps you organise your literature search and produce a specific problem statement that has a well argued theoretical rationale. The topic area, for instance, might be organizational effectiveness but the problem might be expressed in terms of the effectiveness of team-based management where a case study could be carried out of say, three different organizational settings that operate on team-based principles.

6. **It must be manageable in size**. Consider carefully the word limit that is imposed on your thesis. It is a good idea early on to develop an outline of potential chapters, keeping in mind the word limits that are set.

7. **It must have the potential to make an original contribution to knowledge or practice in the appropriate area**. Questions need to be considered about the significance, value or potential use of your research. You will need to ascertain what is expected of the research findings and what contribution they will make (e.g. generating new knowledge, contributing to the literature or improving practice).

8. **It must be able to meet all ethical, legal and risk assessment requirements**. Issues such as securing permits from government or other agencies and UNE ethics committees, protecting the privacy of individuals involved in your study, ensuring intellectual property and likely access to information, need to be considered carefully. Any risk assessment procedures required to be carried out must be clearly indicated.

Creating a good research proposal

Most novice researchers ask what an outline of a proposal might look like. If exemplars of good proposals are available, it will pay you to study these before you set out developing yours.

You would do well to keep the following principles in mind when developing your proposal:

1. A good proposal explains clearly three elements – **what** research is intended, **why** it is being researched and **how** the researcher proposes to carry out the research.

2. A good proposal is **straightforward**. The first words are of vital importance. They need to get to the point directly without 'beating around the bush'. There should be a succinct statement of what the study proposes to do at the start (written in the future tense), something like, 'This study will examine …' or 'This study aims to …'.

3. A good proposal uses **clear and precise language**. While not meant to be a literary masterpiece, all readers with a knowledge of the subject need to be able to understand exactly what is meant in the most concise language possible .

4. A good proposal should be **clearly organised**. It should be written in simple, logical, prose with clear headings and subheadings to mark out major sections.

What follows is a general guide for putting together a more highly developed proposal in the social sciences areas.

Guidelines for creating a well developed research proposal

The following elements are important to include:

Research topic

- Title of the project
- Nature of the problem or issue under examination (the focus of the study)
- Proposed aims and objectives and research questions/hypotheses

Background and context of the study

- How did the problem or issue arise?
- Why is this an important area to study? The significance of the study needs to be stated and comments on the practical and/or theoretical value of the research included.
- Include any underlying assumptions.
- Provide definitions of key terms or concepts used.
- Point out the limitations imposed (the boundaries set).

Methodology

- A tight fit between aims of the study and research strategy chosen must be evident.
- Include statements on:
  - research strategy (e.g., qualitative, quantitative) and justification for approach;
  - research methods (e.g. survey, case study, ethnography, experimental);
  - tools of data collection (e.g., questionnaire, interviews, focus groups, documentary analysis);
  - location and availability of data;
  - methods of data analysis and interpretation;
  - ethical implications (if relevant); and
  - any problems that may be encountered in the conduct of the research.

Literature review (or a general introduction to the topic of 3-5 pages if in experimental sciences)

- Familiarity with the relevant literature needs to be demonstrated.
- A précis of relevant **literature** needs to include:
  - what is already known on the topic;
  - what gaps need to be filled;
  - how the study relates to, builds on or differs from previous work in the topic area; and
  - theoretical considerations (what theory/ies from the literature would help to develop a meaningful conceptual or analytical framework?)

Proposed timeline/milestones

- A schedule indicating plans from commencement right through to submission needs to be provided.

Resources needed and available

- Resources needed should be listed, their availability checked and a budget proposed before beginning the project.

Select bibliography or references

When you have completed preparing your proposal, it would be a good idea to self-evaluate what you have produced. A checklist for doing so appears in what follows.

Evaluating your research proposal

Circle your ratings according to the following criteria

Choice of problem	(insignificant)	1	2	3	4	5	(significant)
Statement of problem	(unclear)	1	2	3	4	5	(clear)
Questions/hypotheses developed	(unclear)	1	2	3	4	5	(clear)
Knowledge of previous work	(poor)	1	2	3	4	5	(excellent)
Critique of relevant literature	(poor)	1	2	3	4	5	(excellent)
Key concepts defined	(poorly defined)	1	2	3	4	5	(clearly defined)
Theoretical framework	(nonexistent)	1	2	3	4	5	(developing)
Mode of inquiry	(inappropriate)	1	2	3	4	5	(appropriate)
Importance in topic area	(unimportant)	1	2	3	4	5	(important)
Likely significance of findings	(low)	1	2	3	4	5	(high)
Research plan	(vague)	1	2	3	4	5	(detailed)
Scope and limitations	(unrealistic)	1	2	3	4	5	(realistic)
Proposal structure	(poorly organised)	1	2	3	4	5	(well organised)
Consideration of ethical issues	(nonexistent)	1	2	3	4	5	(strong)
Persuasiveness	(low)	1	2	3	4	5	(high)
Writing style	(obtuse)	1	2	3	4	5	(precise)
Interest engendered	(low)	1	2	3	4	5	(high)

Argument in support of

- the significance of the problem	(nonexistent)	1	2	3	4	5	(strong)
- the choice of research strategy	(nonexistent)	1	2	3	4	5	(strong)
- the way the research problem is stated (in relation to the literature reviewed)	(nonexistent)	1	2	3	4	5	(strong)
- limitations on the conclusions	(nonexistent)	1	2	3	4	5	(strong)