



Guidelines for Students Submitting their PhD Applications: How to Write Your Proposal

Below are three examples of PhD proposals submitted by UNE doctoral students in the Faculty of The Professions. They are provided as examples to help you put together your preliminary research proposal that needs to be submitted with the PhD application (your PhD application will be incomplete without this document).

Please note that your research topic will change over time and that this is only your *first attempt* to map out what you want to research as part of your PhD studies. You will have many opportunities to refine your research topic in your journey as a doctoral student. The focus and clarity of your topic will change as you formally enrol in your PhD studies, have discussions with your supervisors and immerse yourself in a systematic and comprehensive review of the literature, including the methodology literature. Choosing and developing a researchable topic and securing a tight fit between methodological framework and nature of the problem at hand involves a high level of conceptualization. This can be challenging work and at this stage we do not expect that your proposal will discuss these issues in much detail. This is because enrolment in the course is a commitment of an investment of time and reflective thinking consistently devoted to your research over a number of years and fully answering these complex questions! We ask students to provide this preliminary description of their research topic as an attempt to assist them to narrow down the research question, what literature to search and read and what research methodology they should be considering as appropriate for their research. It also assists the University to find supervisors who have research interests related to your topic.

Please also read the document titled, ‘*Guidelines on how to construct a preliminary proposal*’. This document provides you with a series of headings and questions that will assist you to think about what to include in your research proposal.

A number of principles to follow come to mind, the most important of which are **interest** and **feasibility**. Examine carefully the following to determine to what extent the topic chosen 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 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 one 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.
3. **It must be feasible.** Do you, for instance, have the time and resources to pursue this topic? If you live, say, in Hanoi, plans to carry out a study requiring extensive work in the country areas may not be practical (depending on how much time could be spent travelling). Consider also the financial resources required to complete a project, ethical and legal issues involved, and likely access to information.
4. **It must be sufficiently delimited.** The topic area, for instance, might be Senior Executive Leadership but the problem might be expressed in terms of say, the relationship of leadership qualities to output and efficiency. Long, Convey and Chwalek (1985, p. 28) advise:

First, you need to narrow or delimit your topic enough to make the purpose of your research clear to yourself and others. Sufficient delimitation helps you organize your literature search and produce a specific problem statement with accompanying theoretical rationale.

It is important that the boundaries which are set are clearly articulated in the research. Delimiting the topic is explaining what is **not** going to be included.

5. **It must be manageable in size.** It is a good idea to sketch an outline of what the chapters might look like early on, keeping in mind word limits that are set. Clearly expressed aims and research questions should help to keep the focus in mind.
6. **It must have the potential to make a contribution to knowledge or practice in the appropriate area.** Questions are asked about the ‘significance,’ ‘value’ or ‘use’ of research. Ascertain what is expected of the research project in the program of study; what ‘contribution’ is expected.

The above should be seen as some key issues to consider in selecting a research topic and not as a complete or prescriptive list of decision criteria. Once you enroll in your

studies your supervisors and the subjects you will take in the first year of your studies will provide reading material that will further help you to refine your research project and methodology plan.

Example of a PhD Research Proposal: No 1

Title of Proposed PhD Thesis Project:

The Applicability of the New South Wales' Quality Teaching Model to the Jordanian Primary School Context

Brief Background and Aims for PhD:

The education system in Jordan has been extensively reformed in line with the global movement informed by constructivist thinking. However, there are many fundamental challenges and issues that are still impeding and restraining reform. A related issue is that graduates of Jordanian schools have been described as lacking crucial knowledge and being weak in their critical thinking skills. Some improvement in knowledge and skills is essential if Jordanians are to become competitive in national and international labour markets. This historical weakness in educational outcomes arose for a least two reasons: i) the dismissive cultural attitudes toward teachers because of their status, and ii) growing demands on teachers from school leaders, policy makers, communities and students leading to teach burn-out and resignations (Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation, 1997). The cumulative result of these and other factors is that lower achievers studied teaching at tertiary institutions; a trend that eventually reflected in the sub-optimal achievement of school students (Abul Hameed Shoman Foundation, 1997).

So, despite the Government's move to reform the education system in Jordan, studies conducted to evaluate the results of the reforms have shown that students still demonstrate low skills in relation to critical thinking. Furthermore, since the reforms began, students' basic skills and concepts in mathematics and science and performance in Arabic have not improved (Anani & Al-Qaisee, 1994). Also, some studies of fourth grade students showed that they were failing to implement into their daily lives what they had supposedly learnt in school, and that in schools there was violence, absenteeism, smoking, and attacks on teachers (Oweidat & Hamdi, 1997). Another study showed that teachers still dominated most lesson time and did not give their students an opportunity to express and/or direct themselves nor direct their own learning activities. Most of the questions asked by these teachers will be based on the memorisation of fixed facts. The study also showed that these teachers did not allow any positive interaction in the classroom and that behavioural problems are dominant in the classroom (Alnahar & Kishik, 1994). Because of research findings such as these, the education system in Jordan has faced significant criticism and has been accused by graduating unskilled people who cannot be competitive and meet the economic, social, cultural, political and national challenges and problems (Oweidat, 1997).

If any education reform is to be successful, the dimensions of quality teaching should be included, taught, trained and implemented to meet the aims of that reform. In the

experience of Jordanian education reform, these elements are ambiguous; desired teaching practices neither explained clearly nor adequately. To prevent this reform from failing, a tested and developed model of quality teaching practices based on and solidly grounded in theoretical and empirical platforms, such as the NSWQT Model NSW Department of Education and Training (2003), needs to be provided.

This study will fill the growing gap between the policy and the practices of the education reform movement in Jordan. It aims to assess the Jordanian educational context before domesticating a new model of quality teaching. In my opinion at this point I believe it will be necessary to observe quality teaching practices in Jordanian classrooms before considering a new model of quality teaching.

Research Design:

A qualitative approach of data gathering and analysis will be used, including an analysis of official documents that discuss the perspectives of the Jordanian Ministry of Education (MOE) and the NSWQT model in regards to the concept of quality teaching. Structured observations of day-to-day classroom practice will be conducted, using the NSWQT model's coding sheet, although this will require further investigation to ascertain the validity of using such a coding framework. Field notes will be maintained to achieve appropriate contextual indicators of the visited schools and classrooms. Qualitative interviews will be conducted with seven teachers and six principals. Teachers participating in this study are those identified by the MOE as quality teachers. A thematic analysis will mostly probably underpin the analysis of the transcripts.

References:

- Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation. (1997). *The Education in Jordan: Reality and Challenges (in Arabic)*. Amman: Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation.
- Alnahar, T., & Kishik, R. (1994). *The Life Basic Skills of the Fourth Grade Student in Jordan (in Arabic)*. Amman: The National Centre for Research and Educational Development.
- Anani, H., & Al-Qaisee, H. (1994). *The Standard Achievement in Mathematics of the Fourth Grade Students in Jordan (in Arabic)*. Amman: The National Centre for Research and Educational Development.
- NSW Department of Education and Training. (2003). *Quality Teaching in New South Wales Public Schools: Discussion Paper*. Sydney: NSW Department of Education and Training.
- Oweidat, A. (1997). *Education and Future, From Jourdanian Perspective (in Arabic)*. Paper presented at the Senior Leaders at the Ministry of Education, Amman, Jordan. 1997).
- Oweidat, A., & Hamdi, N. (1997). Behavioral Problems of Male students in 8th, 9th and 10th Classes in Jordan and variables Related to these Problems (in Arabic). *Dirasat*, 24 (2).

Example of a PhD Research Proposal: No 2

Title of Proposed PhD Thesis Project:

Understanding Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) in Rural Communities: A Quantitative and Qualitative Approach

Brief Background and Aims for PhD:

Within the academic literature, a broad range of disciplines incorporates discussions of STIs and provides different perspectives of sexuality. Research on femininity and masculinity draws attention to aspects of sex and gender, raised questions about identity and gives a voice to the problems and concerns of women and men, especially in relation to sexuality. Supplementing this literature is a discussion of these elements particularly in relation to HIV/AIDS. Sontag's (1991) eloquent discussion of 'illness as metaphor' illustrates how historical meanings associated with STIs can be explored from a cultural perspective, and scholars draw attention to the historical response of society to disease, for example, Armstrong (1995) and Brandt (1987, 1988).

However, few scholars have undertaken research to understand how rural people make sense of their experiences in relation to STIs and explore ways in which constructions of rurality might influence access to services for STIs. Such accounts rule out the possibility that the normative perspectives of STIs, particularly those present within a rurality discourse, might inhibit resistance to power regimes and change.

This study evolved from my work in the Hunter New England Health (HNEH) Northern Region. During my time within HNEH, Public Health Division, a notification of congenital syphilis was received which subsequently caused a flurry of concern from NSW Health. This resulted in a number of actions. Firstly, the presence of congenital syphilis within a community demonstrated some deficiencies in relation to service access and necessitated extra effort to prevent the occurrence of further infections. Secondly, an examination of the syphilis notification data showed that the syphilis notifications followed a pattern similar to that of the Socioeconomic Indexes for Area (SEIFA), developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). An overarching question informs this study: Is there a link between disadvantage and sexually transmitted infections and does that affect access to services for sexually transmitted infections in the NHEH Northern Region?

Three key objectives structure this study.

1. To reveal the trends for notifications of syphilis in the Hunter New England Health Northern Region and determine whether there is a relationship between social disadvantage and syphilis in relation to rurality.
2. To determine the factors involved in accessing services for sexual health in relation to rurality.
3. To describe what the experiences are of people with an STI in seeking health care and accessing, using and obtaining treatment in relation to rurality.

Research Design:

Exploration of these objectives requires an approach that not only describes relationships between variables, but also the experiences of people. Therefore, the research aims suit a mixed method approach.

The research consists of two components: quantitative methods to examine syphilis notification data and qualitative methods to seek insights from individuals about their STI experiences. The related perspectives employed in this study permit a quantitative investigation of the ways in which syphilis intersects with aspects of social relations such as social disadvantage, gender and Aboriginality. Complementing this aspect is the use of in-depth interviews to ask about people's experiences of accessing services for STIs. This approach not only reveals how data pertaining to the surveillance of syphilis is an insufficient means to control STI, but also more importantly how rurality affects people's constructed notions of STIs.

Drawing on perspectives of Foucault, Goffman, Sontag, symbolic interactionism and postmodernism, ideas about STIs will be explored through the discourse of public health and the meanings constructed by individuals. The use of these perspectives will allow the construction of a framework that underpins the analysis undertaken in this study and provides an avenue for understanding the public health and individual response towards STIs in rural communities. This is particularly relevant for stigmatising diseases such as STIs, especially when people are required to access services.

The quantitative part will consist of syphilis notifications for the HNEH Northern region over an eleven-year period from 1st January 1994 to 30th December 2004.

In-depth interviews with about 25-30 participants of both gender and aged between 19 and 65 years will provide the data for the qualitative part of the study. Methodological principles of 'grounded theory' will underpin the analysis, although the appropriateness of this methodology will be discussed with my supervisors.

References:

- Armstrong, D. (1995), 'The Rise of Surveillance Medicine', *Sociology of Health & Illness*, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 393-404.
- Brandt, A. 1987, *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States since 1880*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Brandt, A. 1988, 'AIDS as Metaphor: Toward the Social Meaning of Epidemic Disease', *Social Research*, vol. 55, no. 3, pp. 413-432.
- Sontag, S. 1991, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphor*, Penguin Books Ltd, England.

Example of a PhD Research Proposal: No 3

Title of Proposed PhD Thesis Project:

Cystic Fibrosis: Shaping an Information Model to Meet the Needs of Patient and Carers

Brief Background and Aims for PhD:

Internet communities provide a means for a group of peers to communicate with each other. They include discussion boards on Web sites, mailing lists, chat rooms, or newsgroups (Eysenbach & Till 2001). These Internet-based communication facilities are available for people to express emotions, to seek answers to questions, to find information and to provide advice to others 24 hours a day.

Internet postings are accessible for quantitative and qualitative research. Eysenbach and Wyatt (2002) explain that there are three different types of Internet-based research methods. The first is passive analysis such as “studies of information patterns on Web sites or interactions on discussion groups” (Eysenbach & Till 2001:1103). The second method of online research is through active analysis in which researchers participate in communications (Seabold & Kuiper 1997). The third type of Internet-based research gathers information in the form of online semi-structured interviews, online focus groups, Internet based survey, or by using the Internet to recruit participants for ‘traditional’ research (Eysenbach & Till 2001).

This research has a number of aims and objectives, but the main questions are regarding what the information requirements are of adults with Cystic Fibrosis (CF) and the carers of children with CF, and do these requirements change during the different stages of the disease? The researcher will unobtrusively review Cystic Fibrosis (CF) patient and carer needs through the analysis of bulletin board messages; interview patients to establish how their illness impacts on their life and the challenges of living with CF; ascertain the information sources regarding the disease; and will determine from people impacted by CF whether, as the disease progresses, their information needs change.

Research Design:

The main aim of the research is, therefore, to explore the information needs, from a lay-person’s perspective, of adult patients and carers of children with CF. A particular emphasis is to investigate the increasing use of the Internet by patients and carers in an attempt to satisfy those needs, and to assess the extent to which they are being successfully met. In the initial stage of this research study, an approach to data collection and analysis will occur using content analysis to review the subject message titles of bulletin board messages posted on a US-based and an Australian-based bulletin board, which have both been designed for Cystic Fibrosis-related information. A non-invasive manner, in which data may be collected from the two bulletin boards, is considered particularly relevant for a group of people who daily face the struggle with a chronic disease, up until an early death. A qualitative analysis will then be carried out to determine preliminary assumptions to emerge from the content analysis. These will focus on whether there are clearly articulated phases of the disease that require specific information identified in the bulletin board messages.

These will later be verified – or otherwise – during the qualitative phase of this research that will occur during the interviews of adults with CF and carers of children with CF.

Semi structured and detailed interviews will also be conducted with CF patients and carers. The analysis of the interviews will focus on i) the information needs of patients and carers; ii) the sources of information, including Internet-based, and alternative hard-copy information; iii) whether the information requirements changed at the different stages of the disease; and iv) if and how the Internet is providing support regarding CF information.

References:

Eysenbach, G. & Till, J.E. 2001, 'Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research on Internet Communities', *BMJ*, 323: 1103-05 (10 November).

Eysenbach, G. & Wyatt, J.C. 2002, 'Facilitating Research via the Internet', in B. McKenzie (Ed.) *Internet and Medicine*, Oxford University Press, Oxford: 201-225.

Seabold, J.A. & Kuiper R. 1997, 'Comparison of Information obtained from a Usenet Newsgroup and from Drug Information Centres', *Am J Health System Pharm*, 54: 1732-35.

Prepared by Professor Victor Minichiello, 2008