

Executive PhD programme

How to write a research proposal

Writing a research proposal is an essential part of a PhD application. It sets out the central issues or questions that you intend to address during your PhD studies. It outlines the general area within which your research falls, referring to the current state of knowledge and any recent debates on the topic. It should demonstrate the originality of your proposed research. The proposal allows you to prove that you have the aptitude for graduate-level research, for example, by showing that you can communicate complex ideas concisely and critically. It also helps us to match your research interest with an appropriate supervisory team.

There are many ways to write a good research proposal. The following are guidelines. Your research proposal should include:

1. A working title
2. A general background
3. Your research questions
4. A review of the literature
5. Your data and proposed methodology
6. Implications of your research
7. A list of references

1. A working title

A working title should be concise and descriptive. If possible, think of an informative but catchy title: a compelling title not only helps to get the reader's interest but may also predispose him or her favourably towards the proposal. You will be able to revise your title during your research.

You can browse the titles of the research projects of our current PhD students at: www.cass.city.ac.uk/study/executive-phd/programme/research-topics/phd-candidate-research-topics

2. Background

This section should take the form of a brief overview of your proposed area of study and identify the discipline(s) within which it falls. If relevant, you might also refer to how your background

and experience give you competences in your chosen area. This step is essential to identify your setting, that is, the topic and the discipline. For example, academic research on Mergers and Acquisitions (M&As) is large and serves as a testing ground for many economics, finance, organisational behaviour and strategy theories. Different disciplines might look at the same problem but identify different research questions. Before you start, you need to clarify your area or areas.

You can have a look at our academic experts' areas of expertise at: www.cass.city.ac.uk/study/executive-phd/people

3. Your research questions

Your proposal should include your research question(s). Please note that the research questions should not be too general or vague. A good research question identifies a relevant problem, but it is also a question that you can answer within the timeframe of your doctoral studies.

Note that your research question might depend on your setting. Going back to the M&As example, finance scholars might look at the market reactions to certain kinds of mergers. Economists might want to know if CEOs overconfidence impacts on mergers' success. And strategy scholars might like to look at mergers between physical firms and platform digital firms, and research if the cognitive challenge of managers makes integration problematic and how to overcome these challenges.

What makes a good research question?

Identifying a good research question involves looking at what others have done. For example, there is empirical work in finance on market efficiency and merger pricing, and in economics on the long-run efficiency of mergers. And in strategy, there is a lot of work on merger integration. When evaluating your proposal, we will want to know in what way is your question new? To identify a good research question, you will need to be familiar with what is already known.

4. Literature review

In your literature review section, you should demonstrate that you are aware of current debates and issues raised in relevant streams of literature. References to critical academic papers should be made to show that you appreciate their relevance to your research area.

As a PhD is an original piece of research, you should be able to demonstrate that:

- a) You are familiar with your proposed area of studies;
- b) You are aware of (some) the debates and current issues;
- c) You are familiar with the key studies;
- d) You can identify gaps in the existing literature, that is, your proposed research questions have not been studied before.

While at this stage, the literature review will not be comprehensive (it is a proposal after all), it should be cohesive and focused. Some common problems in literature reviews are listed below:

- Failure to identify reference literature (that is, in your broad research area)
- Failure to cite seminal papers
- Lack of awareness of recent developments
- Repetition of information
- Over-reliance on non-academic sources.

5. Your data and proposed methodology

A well-written research proposal will demonstrate an awareness of data and the methodological tools available to address the research questions.

What type of data would you need to carry out your analysis? Are these data available to you? Would you need to collect data (for example, carry out surveys and interviews) or are these data available from your employer? Are you aware of databases collecting the data you might need?

What approaches (qualitative or quantitative) you feel will be most appropriate to carry out your analysis? You may rely on qualitative methods, including interviews. Alternatively, your approach may involve econometrics or statistical modelling. In other cases, you may be combining methodologies.

You should explain why your proposed methods fit with your research questions. It is fine that you have not entirely worked out this part, but we are interested your current thinking. Please note, saying your research is quantitative or qualitative is not sufficient.

6. Implications of your research

Who will benefit from your research? In some cases, you want your research to make a practical contribution to your employer (industry). In other cases, you may wish to make a direct impact on government policy. Finally, you may want to contribute to academic knowledge to see your research published.

7. List of references (Bibliography)

Your research proposal should include a list of references to all journal articles, books and industry publications used in the application.