Department of Sociological Studies

The Research Proposal – an Outline

Your proposal should be typed double-spaced, if possible, and be between 1,000 and 2,000 words.

Your proposal should contain at least the following elements:

A provisional title

This should indicate the overriding focus of the PhD. It should include any key concepts, empirical focus, or lines of inquiry that you aim to pursue. For example: 'Do demonstrations lead to policy change?: New social movements in the Age of Austerity?'. You can negotiate changes in the title with your supervisor should you be successful but it is important to devise a title that describes what you aspire to research – and which looks original and exciting!

A key question, hypothesis or the broad topic for investigation

You need a question or hypothesis to drive the research forward. The question/hypothesis will provide your motivation: to answer the question or prove/disprove the hypothesis. The question/hypothesis will need to be something that has not been posed before. This involves looking at something that no-one has looked at before, or it might mean taking a fresh approach to an existing topic or issue.

An outline of the key aims of the research

The aims of your research should be a short list of answers to the question: what will the PhD do? So, for example 'this PhD will explore...' or 'by carrying out this research, I will contribute to debates about...'. The aims are broader than the questions/hypotheses: they give a prospective statement about the overall destination of the PhD and its potential impact.

A brief outline of key literature in the area [what we already know]

This section should situate your chosen topic in the existing research. Literature reviews are not simply descriptive mapping exercises at PhD level. Here you should identify a small number of key texts that support, extend, or challenge existing work.

A description of the topic and an explanation of why further research in the area is important [the gap in the literature - what we need to know]

This section follows logically from the previous one. It highlights what the gap in current knowledge is and how your research will contribute to original knowledge. Will your research provide a new perspective, generate new evidence, challenge existing assumptions? And, to whom might the PhD be useful and/or of interest: scholars looking at a particular issue, communities within specific institutions, certain groups of people?

Details of how the research will be carried out, including any special facilities / resources etc. which would be required and any necessary skills which you either have already or would need to acquire [the tools that will enable us to fill the gap you have identified]

Here you need to outline what methods you will use to answer your research questions. This section should outline your approach to your research (the methodology) as well as the method of investigation (eg, semi structured interviews, surveys, statistical analysis of existing datasets, content analysis etc).

The resources you need to carry out your work can vary according to the nature of the research: access to a particular archive, specialist library, visits to field sites, the use of analytical software, access to databases, training, workshop attendance and so on. It is important to list any of these resources and give a very brief account of how they will enhance the PhD, as well as how any practical obstacles to accessing resources will be overcome - e.g. how you will fund fieldwork trips.

A plan and timetable of the work you will carry out

This section should be set out over three years with clear indications of how long you will need to prepare for and carry out research (however defined) and allowing at least six months for writing up. Try to be as detailed as you can at this stage. You should also indicate here if you plan to undertake a research degree as the first year of your PhD, in which case you will be applying for a four-year programme (a 1+3 PhD).