How to write a Successful Research Proposal

Topic

How can small business owners develop capabilities to enact and lead business model innovation?

An important part of a PhD application for many of our academic departments is the research proposal. This page provides guidance on writing and preparing a postgraduate research proposal.

First of all, before making an application you should make sure that the specialist area that you wish to study is covered by a member(s) of staff at Lancaster University. You can do this by exploring our academic profiles – simply search for a theme, subject or name to see profiles, research activities, details of current PhD supervision and relation graphs for all Lancaster academics.

Normally a proposal should be between 1500 and 2000 words and will include the following:

**A Working Title of the Topic Area**

This should be succinct and descriptive and should do more than convey the key words associated with the proposed research. Often titles are stated in terms of a functional relationship, because such titles clearly indicate the independent and dependent variables. If possible, think of an informative but catchy title; an effective title not only helps to get the reader’s interest, but may also predispose him or her favourably towards the proposal.

**General Overview of Area**

This should take the form of a brief abstract of your proposed general area of study and identify the discipline(s) within which it falls. You might also refer to the way in which your own background and experience gives you competences in your chosen area. It should include the research question, the rationale for the study, the hypothesis (if any) and the proposed method. Descriptions of the method may include the design, procedures, the sample and any instruments that will be used, where applicable.

**Identification of the Relevant Literature**

In this section you should develop your proposal to demonstrate that you are aware of existing debates and issues raised in relevant bodies of literature. References to key articles and texts should be made to show that you appreciate their relevance to your research area. A PhD is an original piece of research and so you should demonstrate that your proposed area has not been studied before. So you need to identify your niche which will lead on to the thesis preparation.

The literature review can often suffer the following problems so it is important to take these into consideration when drafting it:

* Lack of organization and structure
* Lack of focus, unity and coherence
* Repetition of information
* Failure to cite influential papers
* Failure to keep up with recent developments
* Failure to critically evaluate cited papers
* Citing irrelevant or trivial references
* Dependent too much on secondary sources

**Key Research Questions**

Since you need to demonstrate that the topic can be completed within the normal time period allowed, you need to demonstrate that it is manageable, and so focus on key questions within your niche area.

**Methodology**

You need to demonstrate an awareness of the methodological tools available to you and show some understanding of which would be suitable for your research. It may be that qualitative methods, including the analysis of interviews, is appropriate. Alternatively your approach may involve forecasting or statistical modelling. In other cases you may be combining methodologies. You need to specify the approach you feel will be most appropriate.

**Timescale/Research Planning**

You need to demonstrate an awareness of the need for planning and the timescale of the research.

**Bibliography**

You should include a short list of references to key articles and texts included in the application.

**And finally:**

* We recommend that you contact your department for guidance on whether we need a research proposal for your application
* Make your topic as specific as possible - please avoid broad topic areas which would be unmanageable as PhD topics
* Describe your research areas in detail - do not use vague descriptions of research areas

**10 tips for writing a research proposal for the PhD in International Business and Strategy**

We receive a high number of applications for the PhD programme in International Business and Strategy, we reject 90% of these. The information below will guide you as to how to make your application more successful.

The single most important aspect of your application is your research proposal. Almost all the applications we reject are the result of an inadequate research proposal.

1. Please **do not send us a ‘generic’ proposal.** We are not interested in receiving a proposal that you have written for admission to another university, unless it fits our research interests.
2. We like **dissertations that are ‘academic’**. Our aim is to train researchers who are interested in a career in academia, and are interested in academic publishing. It will give you an advantage if you have published (or tried to publish) in academic journals. We encourage our PhD students to write their dissertations as a series of publishable papers. If you want to do a PhD to enter into a business role, you should probably consider a DBA instead, which has a more practical aspect to it.
3. Your proposal must demonstrate that you have a **good understanding of the** **subject that you propose to research.** This means that you should have read (and cited) various core academic contributions to the relevant fields.
4. The International Business and Strategy unit combines a **strong theoretical focus with sound empirical analysis.**  We are expecting to see that you have read most of the core contributions to international business, and that you are familiar with the theoretical traditions of the fields.
5. **Examine the publications**, both current and past of our staff, and try and link your research proposal to our current or past research publications. At the very minimum, it will improve the reception your proposal receives if you show that you are familiar with the themes in which our staff have worked on, both presently and in the past.
6. Try and **identify a potential supervisor** by examining the published research of our staff. This will greatly enhance the possibility of your application being accepted - if your proposal fits the research interests of a specific potential supervisor.  This means demonstrating a familiarity with their research.  You may wish to send your proposal to potential supervisors for comments before submitting an application formally.  If there is nobody in our unit who has worked on a similar topic as your research proposal, we will probably reject your application.  We have limited supervision capacity, and we only accept students who work on subjects of interest to us.
7. We are interested in seeing your **ability to be** **analytical and critical** in your analysis of the literature. This means that we are interested in **students who disagree with us**, as well as those who agree with our past work. We like students who extend our own work, even if it takes it in a different direction.
8. Please ensure that your proposal is **well-written,**and without typos. Do not waste your time with complex colour graphics. We are mainly interested in your ability to communicate well, and to write in a clear and logical way.
9. Always consider where you will be able to get the **data for your proposed thesis**. Demonstrating familiarity with publically available data sets, and secondary data sources is always impressive. If you have access to firms, private datasets or archives that will facilitate your research, please indicate this in your proposal.
10. We take both an **economics and a management** perspective. This means that your proposal should ideally have a section that provides ‘managerial implications’ or ‘policy implications’ of your proposed dissertation.