

Preparing your research proposal

A crucial part of a PhD application is the research proposal. This page provides guidance on writing a research proposal. Here are a few suggestions on what to include and what to avoid.

In making an application, make sure that the specialist area you wish to study is covered by a member(s) of staff at the University of Cumbria. You can do this by checking the fields of study or by reading our Postgraduate Prospectus.

Normally a proposal should be between 1500 and 2000 words (approximately 6 pages of A4 double-spaced) 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.

General overview of area

This should take the form of a brief abstract of the general area of study. You might also refer to the way in which your own background gives you competences in your chosen area. In considering the proposal the admissions panel will be looking for evidence that an applicant has sufficient grasp of current research in the field to allow the formulation of a feasible research question. 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 the 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 a piece of research containing an original contribution to knowledge and so you should demonstrate that your proposed area has not been studied before, and identify what your niche area will be.

Key research questions

You must demonstrate that the topic can be completed within the normal time period allowed (3-4 years full-time; 4-7 years part-time), therefore you need to show that it is manageable. 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. For example, it may be that qualitative methods, including the analysis of interviews, is appropriate. Alternatively your approach may involve forecasting or statistical, financial or econometric 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.

Avoid

- Broad topic areas which would be unmanageable as PhD topics – make your topic as specific as possible
- Vague descriptions of research areas - describe your research areas in detail
- Subject areas where the University of Cumbria has no expertise