



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

How to write a good postgraduate **RESEARCH PROPOSAL**



Introduction

This guide provides practical information for students who have been asked to submit a research proposal as part of their application for admission to a research degree. It is also relevant to students who are applying to external bodies for postgraduate research funding.

Undertaking a research degree, whether it is a Masters by Research, a PhD, or another type of degree such as an EdD or DMus, can be one of the best experiences of your life. You will have the opportunity to meet eminent researchers and become part of the research community. Postgraduate research will enable you to develop research skills as well as invaluable transferable skills which you can apply to academic life, your current employment or a variety of professions outside of academia. What you gain along the way will serve you for the rest of your life, if only to make you a more confident and knowledgeable person.

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University applications

Whether you are applying to conduct your own research or to undertake an advertised project, you will need to apply for a place at the university of your choice before or at the same time as your application for funding. Securing funding does not always guarantee an offer of a place at the university you are applying to. A university application for postgraduate study is most likely to include a research proposal and/or a personal statement, even if you are applying for a funded project defined by the prospective supervisor.

Writing your proposal

Whether you are limited to one page (as part of a university application form or an enquiry form) or are required to produce something more substantial for an external funder, the rules about writing a good research proposal are the same. You want to stand out from the crowd and have the best chance of being selected. This guide highlights the “Golden Rules” and provides tips on how to write a good research application. Prospective research students may find it useful when asked to provide a research statement as part of their university application or an informal enquiry form.

Discussing and developing your idea

If you already have an idea for your research project or if you are interested in developing your experience in an area of interest within the expertise of a prospective supervisor, you should consider contacting prospective supervisors early on to discuss the possibility of doing a research project under their supervision.

Your prospective supervisor will be crucial to your PhD and may well be able to offer further support with your application. You can look for potential supervisors by visiting the prospective university website, reviewing the research expertise which fits your chosen field best and then searching for researchers who could be potential supervisors.

It is a good idea to have a good general overview of your supervisor’s research expertise as a courtesy to them when you contact them for the first time. This will also allow you to ensure that they are the best person to advise you on your proposal.

You may wish to send an abstract of your research idea or a draft research proposal to prospective supervisors prior to submitting your application, meeting them or talking to them over the phone or by e-mail. Make sure your draft is of good quality, and bear in mind that it is not good practice to contact multiple potential supervisors to comment on the same draft. If you are contacting multiple people, it is courteous to be transparent about this.

If your prospective supervisor is willing to comment on a draft, be prepared to listen to their advice and to answer questions. Critical appraisal is a skill that academic staff have developed over many years so don’t be offended if you receive a lot of comments. Take advantage of the expertise and experience of your prospective supervisor, and show them that you can respond to their feedback. Finally, and very importantly, do not assume that your prospective supervisor will or should do all the hard work for you. It is YOUR proposal!

Fellow students, friends and colleagues can also act as lay readers / proofreaders and give a different perspective on your proposal, in particular on the aims of your research. Most importantly, allow plenty of time to draft, review, edit and proofread.

“ Talking through ideas with my potential supervisor and delving into the literature was super helpful for me to get some good starting points for my draft research proposal. ”

- Nitara, PhD in the School of Biological Sciences

“ I believe that the most important part of a research proposal is to carefully consider the topic you are most interested in studying over the next three years, it’s crucial to identify what you truly love. Then you can try to communicate these ideas with your potential supervisor. By incorporating their guidance, your proposal will be more targeted and effective. ”

- Pei, PhD in the Business School

Golden rules for postgraduate research proposals

Contents:

- Be clear, objective, succinct and realistic in your objectives
- Show that you have identified a clear research gap, i.e. that you are proposing an original research project that will make a significant contribution to knowledge
- Explain why this research should be funded and/or why you are the best person to undertake this project
- Explain why this research is important and/or timely
- State and justify your objectives clearly (“because it is interesting” is not enough!)
- Make sure you answer the questions: how will the research benefit the wider society or contribute to the research community?

Style:

- Provide a clear project title
- Structure your text – if allowed use section headings
- Present the information in short paragraphs rather than a solid block of text
- Write short sentences
- If permitted and relevant to your discipline, provide images / charts / diagrams to help break up the text



Content and style of your research proposal

What to put in your proposal?

Application processes can vary by subject area and discipline, so make sure you follow the relevant guidelines provided by your chosen PhD programme at the University of Edinburgh. If a School/Deanery template is available, you should use this – otherwise the School/Deanery may reject your application.

If you are not given any guidelines on how to format your research proposal, you could adopt the suggested structure below.

Suggested structure for a research proposal:

- Title
- Abstract
- Brief introduction to the project, showing what original research you are proposing
- Critical summary of existing literature
- The hypothesis and the objectives of your project
- Methodology
- How the research will be communicated to the wider academic community, plus any non-academic audiences / users
- How you are prepared for the project
- The supervisory provision as well as specialist and transferable skills training
- Ethical considerations
- Summary and conclusions

Writing the proposal

When writing your proposal, bear in mind that individuals reviewing your application will often have to read a large number of proposals/applications. So, well-presented and clearly written proposals are more likely to stick in the reviewer's mind. Avoid long and convoluted titles. You will get an opportunity to give more detail in your introduction. If applying to an external funding agency, remember that the reviewer may not be an expert in your field of research.

Plagiarism and Generative AI

You must ensure that the application constitutes your own original work. It is anticipated that you will have received feedback from supervisors and/or other academic staff on drafts of your research proposal.

Make sure that you acknowledge the authors of ALL publications you use to write your proposal. Failure to do so will be considered as plagiarism. Do not copy word for word what an author has said. You may think that the original author has presented the information using the best possible words in the best format. However, it is best to analyse the information presented and re-write it in your own words. If you absolutely have to quote an author ad verbatim, then make sure that you use quotation marks and italics to indicate it.

In recent years the use of generative AI tools has sparked numerous inquiries related to research and scholarly practices. The University of Edinburgh's strategy is to embrace curiosity and to pursue knowledge. As one of the first to teach and research in the field of Artificial Intelligence over 60 years ago we have set an ambition to be a global leader in Artificial Intelligence (AI) with integrity. Saying this, all work submitted to the University should be your own original work. It is not appropriate to misrepresent AI generated content as your own work. Copying information from elsewhere or asking someone else to write your proposal, including the use of AI apps such as Chat GPT, could be considered fraud. Be aware that if you use AI tools (such as ChatGPT or others) to generate your submission and submit this as if it were your own work, this will be regarded as academic misconduct and treated as such.

Given the rapid pace of advancements in generative AI, we anticipate the University's guidance around its use in academic and research settings to evolve. When writing your research proposal we strongly recommend checking the current guidance for staff and students available from the University: <https://information-services.ed.ac.uk/computing/comms-and-collab/elm/generative-ai-guidelines-for-students/generative-ai>

Abstract

An abstract is a brief summary written in the same style as the rest of your application. It will provide the reader with the main points and conclusion of your proposal.

Suggested format for an introduction:

- Introduce the area of research
- Review key publications
- Identify any gap in the knowledge or questions which have to be answered
- Your hypotheses
- Your aims and objectives, including a brief description of the methodology
- How is your research beneficial and to whom

Introduction

A well-written introduction is the most efficient way to hook your reader and set the context of your proposed research. Get your reader's attention early on and do not waste space with obvious and general statements. The introduction is your opportunity to demonstrate that your research has not been done before and that the proposed project will really add something new to the existing body of literature. It is essential that you identify any gap in the knowledge or questions that have yet to be answered about your proposed area of research. Your proposal does not have to be worthy of a Nobel Prize but it has to be based on sound hypotheses and reasoning.

You should provide background information in the form of a literature review which sets the context for your research to help the reader understand the questions and objectives. You will also be expected to show that you have a good knowledge of the body of literature, the wider context in which your research belongs, as well as an awareness of methodologies, theories and conflicting evidence in your chosen field.

Research proposals have a limit on words or pages so you won't be able to analyse the whole existing body of literature. Choose key research papers or public documents and explain clearly how your research will either fill a gap, complete or follow on from previous research even if it is a relatively new field or if you are applying a known methodology to a different field. Journal articles, books, PhD theses, public policies, government and learned society reports are better than non-peer-reviewed information you may find on the internet. The University's Library hosts online guidance on getting started with researching, managing your sources, and practical information on finding what you need in search engines.

- www.ed.ac.uk/information-services/library-museum-gallery/finding-resources

Although you will develop your ideas further in the main body of the text, your introduction may also include a short summary of your aims and objectives, your methodology and the expected outcomes/benefits of your research as well as who it will benefit and who will be able to use it.

Main body of text

Honesty is one of the most important aspects in proposal development so avoid making over-ambitious claims about the intended research; what is proposed must be realistically achievable.

When drafting the proposal, it is worth asking yourself the following questions and trying to answer them in the text:

- How will my project make an original contribution to knowledge?
- Why should anyone spend public, charity or corporate funds on my research and my research training?
- Who is my research going to benefit (the stakeholders) or be of use to (the end users)?

“ In my experience, it is important to try and find a common interface between your research interest and what is out there in the field. Research groups often follow a certain research theme which might not necessarily align with your core interest. However, being flexible and allowing for adjusting your principal research interest and bringing it in line with the research group of your interest will almost, always help you produce an excellent research proposal.

”

- Rizwan, PhD in the Deanery of Biomedical Sciences

- Stakeholders and end-users include, for example, the research community, a professional body or groups of researchers, a particular group of people such as children, older people or doctors, the government, the industry, health services, social workers. Try to be specific: stating that your research will benefit the world is likely to be too vague!
- Is there evidence, for example in the literature, that your research will fill a gap in knowledge or a market demand? How will it build on the existing body of knowledge?
- Is your research timely, innovative and/or responding to a new trend?
- How will your research proposal address my training needs as well as, if applicable, the needs of my current employer?

“ Remember that you are not expected to be a well-rounded expert at this stage; this is what your studies are for! Instead, focus on delivering a captivating yet realistic project idea, elaborate on the acquired knowledge and expertise you do have, and mention any learning avenues for further development.

”

- Nadine, School of Literatures, Languages & Cultures

You should also consider expected outputs to be achieved by the research such as publications, conference papers, a new database, fundamental knowledge of a new or existing field, contribution to a new policy, and/or development of a new technology or service.

It is also very useful to describe the milestones of your research projects (a time plan for every 6 months, for Year 1, 2, 3 or a Gantt chart). This will demonstrate to the reviewer or prospective supervisor that you have really thought about how you intend to conduct your research. But be realistic: make sure that the project is feasible within the prescribed period of study for your PhD programme.

Methodology – how will you achieve the research aims?

It is important to present the proposed research methodology (e.g. techniques, sample size, target populations, species choice, equipment and data analysis) and explain why it is the most appropriate methodology to answer the research question effectively. If space allows, it may be a good idea to justify the methodology by explaining what alternatives have been considered and why these have been disregarded. You could also point out how your project fits with the research environment at the University of Edinburgh and why this institution is the best place to conduct your research, in particular if this will provide you with access to unique expertise, pieces of equipment or data.

Ethical considerations

Universities and funding bodies have strict rules and expectations of the standards with which the research they fund should be carried out. Project proposals must therefore include potential ethical issues raised by the conduct of the research. You should show how you plan to address these. This is particularly important if your research project is deemed “high risk” i.e. if it involves animals, sensitive materials or vulnerable groups such as children or adults with disabilities, or if you will be collecting data with participants residing outside of the UK. You may also be asked to indicate what the ethical approval system is in your prospective School. Your prospective supervisor will be able to provide you with this information.

About you

The quality of your ideas combined with your ability to carry out the project successfully within your chosen Department, School, or Institute will be a useful addition to your research proposal. It is a good idea to include a small section indicating how your research interests, previous achievements, relevant professional experience and qualifications have prepared you to successfully undertake your chosen PhD project. Remember to highlight any project management, data analysis and critical thinking experience you may have gained previously. You should indicate what further research training you will require in order to successfully complete your PhD.

Avoid overly personal or vague statements but do try to point out:

- the most important achievements of your (academic) career: degrees you have obtained, your IT skills, societies you were part of, work experience, successful projects you have been involved in, focusing particularly on evidence of your preparedness to undertake your specific PhD project (e.g. relevant courses that you have undertaken)
- evidence of your potential to succeed at PhD study, e.g. motivation, enthusiasm, an inquiring mind, ability to carry out analytical work, a keen approach to research or ability to work independently.

Dissemination

If space allows, indicate how you will be communicating with colleagues and your supervisors as well as with the wider community and, if applicable the funding body supporting your research.

Examples of dissemination activities are:

- Internal seminars
- Regular reporting to stakeholders (e.g. health service, industrial partner)
- Publications (e.g. journal articles, reviews, book chapters)
- Conference presentations
- Exhibitions
- Outreach (e.g. Research Communication in Action) and Public engagement events (e.g. Café Scientifique, Biotechnology YES, Edinburgh Science Festival)

Summaries and conclusions

Well-written summaries and conclusions at the end of the proposal and/or at the end of each section can help a reviewer identify the important information. Make sure these are concise, clear and informative – some reviewers will start by reading the conclusions. Reviewers tend to have a large number of applications to review and/or to be very busy people. As a result, each proposal will only receive a short time. Your proposal has to stand out!

The process of applying to external funding providers

Research funding

In choosing where to do your research degree, a long list of factors will come into play: the academic reputation of the institution, the research expertise of academic staff, location, the quality of training offered and the availability of funding.

There are several types of funding for postgraduate research: your own funds; external funding bodies such as charities and trusts; national and governmental agencies; employers and the private sector, and internal sources such as university scholarships, funded studentships and projects advertised by supervisors. It is a competitive process and will depend on your qualifications, experience and research aspirations.

How to identify funding sources

Investigating potential funding sources and preparing postgraduate research applications is a lengthy process, so you should allow plenty of time. It is not unreasonable to start approximately one year before your proposed start date.

The University of Edinburgh's Scholarships and Student Funding Services offer a search facility for prospective and existing students: www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/student-funding/search-scholarships

You should check the websites of individual departments as they may have additional funding resources and this is where you will find details of research projects. There is also funding available from external funding bodies, including trusts and charities, research foundations, government agencies, the private sector or your home government.

Search facilities include www.researchresearch.com (available only on campus) and search engines can also be helpful if you are looking for organisations which fund research in your area of interest. If you are responding to an advertisement for a defined project, it does not mean that you should not pay attention to the first contact you make with the principal researcher on the project. Make sure that you highlight how the project fits with your research aspirations and why the chosen academic unit will help you fulfil them.

Rules, guidelines, eligibility and deadlines

A surprisingly large percentage of proposals are rejected simply because they do not follow the rules and guidelines specified by the funding body. Deadlines are nearly always firm (unless called "rolling") and it is highly unlikely that they would be changed for anyone. Follow the rules, guidelines and eligibility criteria to the letter! The funder has produced them for a reason and failure to follow these will almost guarantee the rejection of your proposal. If the funder has published selection criteria, use these to tailor your application to the opportunity being advertised.

Screening process

The most popular funding bodies will have a very strict screening process which will be carried out before the reviewer gets to see the proposals. Any application which does not comply with rules and regulations, including editorial ones such as font size or number of pages will not be accepted. The number of proposals will almost always exceed the number of awards available so do not provide reasons for your application to be rejected on format.

The application process

Bear in mind that some funders have closing dates early in the year so it is a good idea to start the application as soon as possible (about a year before your proposed start date). External funders will often ask you to have, at least, a conditional offer of admission at the proposed university or to have an endorsement from the university you are planning to go to. Some funding will only be tenable at the university stated in the application so make sure you read all the guidelines.

Finding a potential research studentship funder

If you are seeking external funding for your own project, the next step is to find the most appropriate funding body and funding stream for your particular research project. Your prospective supervisor and previous undergraduate/Masters study advisors will be excellent sources of knowledge in this area. Other members of staff in university scholarships offices, careers services, research support offices or student recruitment and admissions (if they have staff specialising in postgraduate studies) may be able to help you.

Before you start developing your research proposal, it is worth researching your chosen funding body (whether it is a university or an external funding agency). Once an opportunity has been identified, you should ensure that you have checked:

- that your research idea is in a research area supported by the prospective funder;
- that you are eligible to apply (e.g. nationality, affiliation, qualifications);
- that you have allowed sufficient time for drafting the research proposal;
- that you understand fully the funder's selection process;
- that you have allowed sufficient time to complete the proposal before the closing date and;
- how the application should be submitted to the funder. Some funders (e.g. AHRC and ESRC) require that you register on their system and may require approval from your prospective university.

“ It's common to apply for funding several times. If you failed the first time, it doesn't mean you are a failure or can never get funding. ”

- Daisy, Moray House School of Education and Sport

Before you start writing

All funders (government-funded research councils, universities, research charities, or private companies) have objectives to fulfil set by the people and organisations that they answer to, including stakeholders and financial supporters. When they invest in research, they are looking for that investment to help them achieve those objectives. For private sector employers, it may be to improve their business processes, increase their R&D potential or to train employees. For research charities, it may be to find ways to help particular groups of people such as those in unemployment or those affected by a medical condition.

All funders, universities and prospective supervisors want good applicants. However, they will have different ways of reviewing your application and may have strict criteria against which to assess your proposal. Try to be objective. For example, if your research proposal involves a 10-year geological survey, it is unlikely that the funder will want to fund it as a PhD studentship which is set to last for a defined and shorter period of time. Similarly, if your proposal contains too few or too many research activities for the period of proposed research training, they will be reluctant to fund it. The former will not be considered good value for money and the latter will be perceived as having a risk of failure against the objectives planned at the beginning of the project.

Make sure you consider how best to present the ideas/objectives of the research project and their value clearly as there is stiff competition for postgraduate research awards. A proposal should not just be “good enough” but one of the best.

Lay summary

In addition to an abstract and an introduction, you may be asked to produce a lay summary, the impact of which is not to be underestimated. While funders may use expert panels to assess research proposals, the final decision may rest with individuals (for example: Trustees from a charity) who will not necessarily have the expertise in your proposed field of research. Make sure you “grab” the readers' attention by presenting a clear and succinct summary. As an indication, some Research Councils advise that the lay summary be written in a style which should allow reasonable understanding by an interested 14-year old.

“ Seeking feedback from friends and family was key in helping me draft my research proposal. Discussing with peers offered valuable insights into whether the principles of my study could be understood more widely. ”

- Nitara, PhD in Biological Sciences

Training and supervision

The training and supervision of research students is an important consideration. Prospective postgraduate research students will be expected to gain specialist and transferable skills so, if the funder requires it, indicate what provisions are in place at your proposed university. The University of Edinburgh runs one of the best and most proactive transferable skills programmes, please visit: www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/institute-academic-development

Individual university websites will also provide information regarding the facilities and structure of your specialist training e.g. skills in a particular technique, access to archives, a seminar programme (to which you may be asked to contribute), a mentoring scheme (if in place) or access to a Graduate School. Think about what training you need to complete your specific project successfully, not just a PhD in general.

Dissemination

Funders want the research they support to help and inspire others, therefore proposals which highlight what the expected benefits of the research are and how the research findings will be communicated to the wider community have a greater chance of success. Please note that some funders have strict rules about reporting but it does no harm to indicate that you will comply with these rules. Other funders such the private sector may sometimes request an embargo period for your research to be published so you must check, with your supervisor, what the terms and conditions are. Examples are provided in the section on dissemination (see page 8).



Other resources

- The Postgraduate Companion (2008). Chapters 4-7; Hall G. and Longman J. Eds, Sage Publications London, UK.
- The PhD Application Handbook: Revised Edition (2012). Bentley PJ. Eds, Open University Press, Maidenhead, UK.
- Vitae (formerly UKGRAD): www.vitae.ac.uk
- FindaPhD: www.findaphd.com/advice



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