



democratising access to higher education

Workshop on PhD Applications
Sunday, 2 October 2022



Outline

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- Meet your Panelists
- What is a research degree?
- Preparing for a PhD
- PhD Proposals
- Approaches to PhD Applications
- The Role of a Supervisor
- Approaching a Supervisor
- General Tips
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Project EduAccess

Access to higher education is a privilege most people from marginalised communities are systematically denied through cost, information and dispositional barriers.

Project EduAccess is a modest attempt to improve inclusivity in HEIs by removing these barriers for marginalized communities in South Asia.

We hope to achieve this by providing expert mentorship, support and guidance to learners in South Asia.

Meet your panelists



Mishika Mehrotra

PhD Psychology
University of Cambridge



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DPhil History
University of Oxford



What is a research degree?

- In a taught masters degree, you attend regular classes in your subjects of interest, and at the end of the year, you sit for exams in these subjects. While a lot of masters degrees have a dissertation component, the taught component always dominates such degrees.
- On the other hand, in a research degree like a PhD/ DPhil, there is very limited emphasis on teaching (teaching is typically limited to courses on research methods). Instead, you are expected to write a thesis on an important contemporary debate/ issue in your field of study. Therefore, the research component takes priority.
- **Remember:** No one research degree looks the same as another. Each university will offer something different; each country will offer something different. You need to pay close attention to all these differences right from the beginning, so you can figure out which type of research degree suits you best.



Preparing for a PhD – Building your Profile

- A doctoral degree like a PhD requires you to undertake rigorous, independent research in your field of study. Therefore, you should be able to show that you have good research skills. Good academic grades rarely matter when it comes to PhD programme! Instead, what will give you an edge over other applicants is your ability to undertake quality research.
- You can build your profile for a PhD by:
 - Pursuing research assistantships with professors in your field of study
 - Pursuing research internships/ projects at various organisations
 - Publishing articles/ blogs
 - Pursuing a research degree
 - Writing original dissertations in your undergraduate degrees
 - Having work experience in your relevant field of study
 - Applying for teaching/ tutoring roles



Preparing for a PhD – Ideation

- A PhD thesis needs to make an original contribution to existing knowledge. Central to this exercise is selecting a topic to research.
- Coming up with a research idea can be a daunting task, but it's the necessary first step that anybody interested in doing a PhD must take.
- Ideas may come from the following:
 - Looking at other projects, which will probably mention areas for further research
 - Brainstorming with other students
 - Conversations with practitioners, colleagues, potential users of the research
 - A personal interest
 - A work interest
 - Issues arising during previous study
- Carefully reading literature surrounding your topic of interest will help you identify the grey areas/ gaps in knowledge you can address in your PhD thesis.



PhD Proposals

- A research proposal is a central part of any PhD application. It is a statement that presents the research idea or question you wish to explore through your PhD thesis.
- Research proposals are usually assessed on their quality, originality and coherence. They are significant because they not only give reviewers a clear sense of how prepared you are for doctoral research, but also allow them to assess whether the university/department can support you adequately.
- Importantly, since the process of drafting research proposals involves careful reflection on your intended research (including approach, methodology, and feasibility), it will help you clarify your idea and make conducting your research easier when you start your PhD.

Common Heads to Cover in a PhD Proposal

1

Title + Introduction

2

Statement of Problem +
Research Questions

3

Literature Review

4

Methodology

5

Significance

6

Timeline

7

Field Plan

8

Ethical Concerns

9

Tentative
Bibliography /
References



Common Heads to Cover in a PhD Proposal

TITLE + INTRODUCTION

- Your title should clearly indicate what your proposed research is about.
- A short introduction that lays down the background and context for your research is helpful.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

- Your research proposal should outline precisely what your research is about – in other words, it should identify the exact research question(s) you wish to explore in your PhD thesis. Some questions you should consider addressing in this relation include:
 - What difference do you think your research will make? What is the intended outcome of your research? Is it addressing any gap in existing knowledge?
 - What are the smaller proof points that underpin your overall research objective?

Common Heads to Cover in a PhD Proposal

LITERATURE REVIEW

- This section of your PhD proposal discusses the most important theories and texts that surround and influence your research questions, conveying your understanding and awareness of the key academic dialogues and debates.
- What is it : Using existing literature and canons of scholarship to conceptualize your study. Different from simply summarizing the literature.
- Why a literature review: Tells the reader about the existing scholarship, themes, debates relevant to your work. How you plan to employ existing literature to develop your theoretical framework. Helps identify the possible intervention your study could make by identifying the gaps in scholarship or by problematizing certain lenses of viewing a problem or issue and therefore break new grounds or may be validate the existing studies.
- How to write it:
 - Search for relevant literature> Evaluate sources> Identify themes, debates, and gaps> Outline the structure> Write your literature review
- A good literature review doesn't just summarize sources — it analyzes, synthesizes, and critically evaluates to give a clear picture of the state of knowledge on the subject.



Common Heads to Cover in a PhD Proposal

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- A well-written overview of your methodology is important. Outline how you will answer your research questions. Address what theoretical frameworks will you draw on, and how you will collect data (as appropriate). It is crucial that you highlight why you have chosen a particular methodology, and why others may not have been as suitable.
- Finally, this section should also highlight potential limitations you anticipate with your methodology, feasibility within time and other constraints. Any ethical considerations and data protection issues related to your research methodology should also be clearly outlined, along with a plan on how you will address these.
- Tells the reader how you will conduct your research- what tools, methods, approaches, overarching framework, sampling , field sites will you employ to conduct your research.
- Chosen methodology should justify the needs & rigors of your study.



Common Heads to Cover in a PhD Proposal

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- The 'what' questions: What research problem or question will you investigate? What type of data did you need to achieve this aim? What variables you are looking at?
- The 'why' questions: why did you choose these methods and approaches for your study? Why is this the best way to answer your research question? Why this sample? Why this field site or archive ?
- The 'how' questions: How will you generate the sample? How will you collect the data? How will you approach the field?
- Describe your data collection tools (method).
- Justify your methodological choices.



Common Heads to Cover in a PhD Proposal

SIGNIFICANCE OF YOUR RESEARCH

- Outline why your research question is worth asking, and what impact your research will have on the discipline/ existing knowledge. Increasingly, PhD students are also being asked to consider what societal impact their research might have.
- You should also demonstrate how your research is innovative and original.

INDICATIVE TIMELINE

- Outline the main stages of your research (for e.g., literature review, data collection, data analysis, writing up, etc.) and depending on the duration of your PhD programme, explain what you are expecting to complete in each year of your PhD. It might be helpful to offer at least year one in detail and the following years in broader terms. Ultimately, you have to show that your research is likely to be finished in the proposed timeframe.

ETHICAL CONCERNS

- Set of principles that guide your research designs and practices. Scientists and researchers must always adhere to a certain code of conduct when collecting data from people.
- These considerations work to protect the rights of research participants, enhance research validity, maintain scientific integrity.

ETHICAL CONCERNS

- Examples: Voluntary participation, Informed consent, Anonymity, Confidentiality, Potential for harm, Results communication, work is free of plagiarism or research misconduct, and you accurately represent your results

BIBLIOGRAPHY/ REFERENCES

- At the end of your PhD proposal, provide a list of the references/ sources you used throughout your proposal. Ensure that you cite what you see as the key readings in your field of study.
- Be selective
- Demonstrate that you have actually read the sources you cite, know which further sources you will need to consult, and why
- Include most of the materials that will actually be used in the finished research project
- The bibliography should list the following under separate subheadings:
 - a. Works Cited - all works cited in the proposal
 - b. Works Consulted - all works consulted in preparation of the proposal
 - c. Works to Be Consulted - all works you intend to consult in further research and writing
- Sources within these various sections can be further divided into: primary and secondary works, or according to the various media they represent (books, journals, recordings, interviews, on-line databases)
- Formatting Style guidelines



Approaches to PhD Applications

- If you are considering a PhD, there may be several options available to you:
 - You may have opportunities to apply for a funded PhD where you research a set project at a university (here, your application looks similar to a job application).
 - You may be able to convert a research assistantship with a professor into a full-time PhD.
 - Some universities allow you to design your own research project - here, the research proposal will form a central part of your PhD application.
 - Some universities/ PhD programmes expect you to first reach out to a potential supervisor and run your ideas past them, before submitting your application.
 - Some universities do not require you to contact a potential supervisor in advance. However, it is still important that you consider whether there is a right supervisor for you at the university. Other factors to consider before applying to a certain university include: availability of funding, programme structure, duration of the PhD, specialisations and interdisciplinarity (if relevant to your research topic), availability of other research/ career/ teaching opportunities.



The Role of a Supervisor

- The role of a supervisor in a PhD student's life is threefold: to advise the student, to monitor their academic progress, and to act as a mentor. Supervisors are responsible for fostering the intellectual and scholarly development of their students. They also play an important role in providing advice about professional development and both academic and non-academic career opportunities.
- Considering the significant role they play in your academic career, it is important that you make a careful selection.
- For most PhD students, the desire to work with particular people is what determines their choice of university/ choice of PhD programme.



Approaching a Supervisor

- For most PhD programmes, you are expected to first reach out to a potential supervisor you think can best guide you and run your research ideas past them. If they like your research idea, they may be willing to help you draft your PhD proposal (which is likely to improve your chances of being selected once you apply for the PhD).
- This process of approaching potential supervisors can be daunting! It involves cold-emailing several professors and hoping for a reply!
- You are likely to hear from a potential supervisor if in your first email to them:
 - Explain your research topic in two lines and then demonstrate how it aligns with the area of work of the supervisor or why you are interested to work with them
 - Your academic CV (containing a profile of all your research experience)
 - Ask for feedback on your proposal.
- Some potential supervisors are likely to come back to you and ask for a writing sample. While you don't need to send a writing sample in your first email itself, it's good to keep one ready, so you can promptly send it to anyone who asks for it.



General Tips

- Before you start drafting your research proposal, research various universities carefully to confirm that they have PhD programmes and supervisors that align with your research interests.
- Make sure you address why your research question is worth pursuing. Don't just assume that a potential supervisor or admissions committee will agree with you that it is worth pursuing.
- Remember that it is more impressive to meaningfully explore a narrower research question than to superficially explore multiple research questions or a broad research question.
- Adopt a clear and easy-to-read structure, with appropriate headings. Ensure that your proposal is clear, concise and coherent.
- Refine and edit your proposal a number of times before it is submitted. Ensure that your research proposal has been proofread by someone familiar with your field of study (to confirm that it conforms to academic standards). Run a grammar and spelling check before submitting your proposal!
- Check each university's website for guidance on points to cover in your proposal, word/ character limits, formatting and citations, submission guidelines, deadlines, and additional documents or evidence.
- Finally, remember that you are not expected to know everything about your PhD topic at this stage. It is understood by all reviewers that you will learn and discover a lot during your PhD!



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