

2022

A stylized, grey line-art illustration on a black background. It depicts a hand holding a magnifying glass over an open book or document. A lightbulb icon is visible within the document's pages, symbolizing research and discovery.

## ABOUT PROJECT EDUACCESS

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

Launched in 2021, Project EduAccess is a modest attempt to improve inclusivity in higher education institutions and work towards removing these barriers for students from marginalized communities in South Asia.

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

In addition to running a mentorship programme and organising workshops, Project EduAccess also regularly develops content such as guides and documents that aid potential applicants in their university and scholarship application processes. This guide for drafting research proposals is a part of our series *Guides on Application Documents*.

## **DISCLAIMER**

This guide, prepared for the benefit of prospective applicants, is a compilation of advice available on the websites of several universities and scholarship bodies. The information provided is for general informational and educational purposes only. All information is provided in good faith.

## **DRAFTING RESEARCH PROPOSALS FOR PHD APPLICATIONS**

A research proposal is a statement that presents, with clarity, the research idea or question you wish to explore through your PhD thesis. It makes a case for the significance of your research idea and the value your research will add to your discipline.

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.

If you are considering a PhD, there may be two options available to you, depending on the university you are applying to. Particularly within the STEM discipline (and even in other disciplines), you may have opportunities to apply for a funded PhD where you research a project set by a university under a certain supervisor. Other universities may allow you to design your own research project (which is usually the case in the humanities and social sciences). If you are expected to design your own research project, the research proposal will form a central part of your PhD application. If you are applying for a PhD where you join an existing project, you are more likely to be asked to submit a statement setting out how your educational qualifications, research interests and skills make you an ideal candidate to join the project.

## **PREPARING FOR A PHD – BUILDING YOUR PROFILE**

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
- Undertaking for teaching/ tutoring roles

## **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.

### **PREPARING TO DRAFT A RESEARCH PROPOSAL**

Before you start drafting your research proposal, It is important to research your universities of choice carefully to confirm that they have PhD programmes and supervisors that align with your research interests, and can offer any specific resources that your PhD project demands.

Some universities/ PhD programmes also expect you to first reach out to a potential supervisor and run your ideas past them, before submitting your application. If your university of interest expects you to do this, remember that you'll need to have a clear idea of the research you hope to undertake before approaching a potential supervisor. In your first email to your potential supervisor, it is good to send them a brief note on your research idea along with your academic CV. Once you have discussed your idea with them and established a relationship with them, you can ask your potential supervisor to read the first draft of your research proposal. They may be able to give you valuable feedback and help you refine your ideas before you submit your application.

Before you start writing your research proposal, look for the university's and the specific programme's requirements for PhD proposals. In the sections below, you will find some general guidance on PhD proposals. However, remember that each

department/ programme/ university could want something slightly different from you, even content-wise. Therefore, check whether you need to submit a proposal at all, and if yes, think about:

- Points to cover in your proposal,
- word/ character limits,
- formatting and citations,
- submission guidelines,
- deadlines, and
- additional documents or evidence.

## **COMMON HEADS TO COVER IN A RESEARCH PROPOSAL**

### *TITLE*

Your title should clearly indicate what your proposed research is about.

### *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 as well as the expected outcomes. 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?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section of your PhD proposal discusses the most important theories, models and texts that surround and influence your research questions, conveying your understanding and awareness of the key academic dialogues and debates. It should focus on the theoretical and practical knowledge gaps that your work aims to address, as this ultimately justifies and provides the motivation for your project. This section should convince a reviewer that you have a strong understanding of the key theories and debates in your area of research area, and that your proposed research will fill an important gap in existing knowledge.

*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 analyses, synthesizes, and critically evaluates to give a clear picture of the state of knowledge on the subject.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this section, outline how you will answer each of your research questions. A strong, well-written overview of your methodology is important, especially if your project involves extensive collection and significant analysis of primary data. Address what materials and equipment you will use, 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. You need to demonstrate that you have put thought into your approach and why it is the most appropriate way to carry out your research. 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.

It needs to broadly respond to the following questions:

- The 'what' questions: What research problem or question will you investigate? What type of data will 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 group? 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?

### *SIGNIFICANCE OF YOUR RESEARCH*

In this section, you should 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*

A research timeline is a critical component of your proposal. Outline the main stages of your research (for e.g., literature review, data collection, data analysis, writing up,

etc.). Depending on the duration of your PhD programme, explain what you are expecting to do 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.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY/ REFERENCES**

At the end of your PhD proposal, provide a list of the references/ sources you used throughout your proposal. Ensure that you list references in line with the prescribed style of citation. Ensure that you cite what you see as the key readings in your field of study.

Apart from the above heads, some universities/ disciplines/ programmes may also require you to submit a budget along with the PhD proposal. In this section, you are typically expected to list everything you will reasonably require to complete your project, such as equipment, travel expenses for fieldwork, translation costs, interview software, staff salary, etc.

### **GENERAL TIPS**

- 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**. Ask yourself:
  - Is what you have written intelligible and clearly articulated, or is it vague and confusing?
  - Have you written your proposal in a succinct and focussed way?
  - Does your proposal flow well so that it tells the reader a short story about the what, the why and the how of your research?
- 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!
- 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!

## **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:

- You include an overview of your research idea (i.e. what you believe is the gap in existing knowledge and how you plan to address that gap through your research)
- demonstrate how your research 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)

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.

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