



democratising access to higher education

Workshop on Writing PhD Proposals
Sunday, 27 November 2022



Outline

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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



Aadarsh Mishra

DPhil (Engineering) Candidate
University of Oxford



Srikrupa Raghunathan

PhD (Film Studies) Candidate
Queen Mary University of London



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DPhil (Law) Candidate
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Choosing a PhD Programme

- 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 may look similar to a job application).
 - 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.



PhD Research 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.



Funding/ Grant Proposals

- Whereas a research proposal is a statement that explains how you intend to answer a research question, a grant or funding proposal/ application explains why you deserve funding to complete the research proposed.
- There are elements of overlap between the two documents (for e.g., both require an explanation of the significance of your research idea), but it's the purpose of the document that defines one or the other.
- Unlike a research proposal, all grant proposals require a strong statement about the qualifications of the applicant (including their ability to carry out the proposed research). All grant proposals will be evaluated on the basis of 'value for money', unlike research proposals.
- Most grant proposals will require you to include a research statement, so your research idea can also be assessed for originality, potential contribution to knowledge, research design and methods, outputs and impact.

Common Heads to Cover in a PhD Research Proposal

1

Title

2

Research Questions

3

Literature Review

4

Methodology

5

Significance

6

Timeline

7

Ethical Concerns

8

Budget

9

References



Common Heads to Cover in a PhD 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. 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- This section 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.
- Remember that the chosen methodology should justify the needs and rigors of your study.
- 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.



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

- Researchers must always adhere to a certain code of conduct when collecting data from people. These ethical and data protection considerations work to protect the rights of research participants, enhance research validity, and maintain scientific integrity.



Common Heads to Cover in a PhD Proposal

PROPOSED BUDGET

- The budget translates project activities into monetary terms. Where a university asks you to propose a budget or indicate how your study will be financed, your research proposal must include an item wise/ activity wise breakdown of costs/ expenses.

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.
- However, 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.



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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Other ways to get in touch

