UNIVERSITY OF EXETER | DOCTORAL COLLEGE

HOW TO WRITE A POSTGRADUATE
RESEARCH PROPOSAL

exeter.ac.uk/pg-research
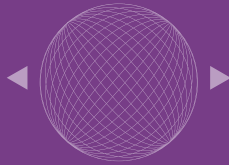
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research university**

❝ One of the best things about doing a
PhD at Exeter is having access to such a diverse
community who think in different ways. ❞

Myles-Jay Linton PhD,
Health Economics

Contents

INTRODUCTION

This guide will help you to write an excellent postgraduate research proposal. It will enable you to think about your proposed PhD research in a clear, structured and meaningful way.

A successful research proposal will depend on many factors including:

- The nature of your proposed research

- The quality of your ideas

- Your ability to commit to and focus on an intensive period of research study

- The effectiveness of your research proposal in communicating your ideas and the match between the proposed research and the potential supervisor

WHY YOUR RESEARCH PROPOSAL IS IMPORTANT

The quality of your research proposal will play a significant role in your application, and thus a considerable factor in the university's decision to accept you onto a PhD programme.

In short, the better your proposal, the better your chances of being accepted. So make it your finest work.

Help us get to know you

Your research proposal is a crucial part of the PhD application process, so it's certainly worth investing your time and energy into it. A good proposal needs to outline the aims of your PhD study and give some indication of how you will conduct your proposed research.

Remember, a research proposal is about what you want to achieve; it immediately reflects your initial understanding of, and commitment to, PhD level learning. A research proposal can and should make a positive and powerful first impression about your potential to become a good researcher.

Your research proposal should demonstrate two key things:

1. That you are capable of **independent critical thinking and analysis**

2. That you are capable of **communicating your ideas clearly**

WHAT SHOULD YOUR PROPOSAL INCLUDE?

1 Title

At this stage of the application process, your title will be first thing that will be read, so it is really important.

Think about key words which describe your idea and how best to arrange them attractively; a clear title will make your proposal stand out.

If you will be sponsored to undertake your PhD please indicate any requirements your sponsor has regarding your research topic and its title. This increases the likelihood of any offer we are able to make you which meets the needs of your sponsor.

2 Abstract

Your proposal should include a concise statement of your intended research (100 words at the absolute maximum). This may be a few sentences which set out the problem that you want to examine or the central question that you wish to address. This is your chance to tell us why the project and research area excites you!

3 Context

You should explain the broad background against which you will conduct your research. This section should include a brief overview of the area of study within which your proposed research would fall, summarising recent notable debates and publications on the topic and current knowledge in the field.

4 Questions

This section should explain the central aims and questions that will guide your research. Remember: it's important to reflect on your key research question to make sure your research proposal is sufficiently focused and also possible to complete in the timeframe.

For example, you could consider the main milestones for each year of your PhD, any challenges you might encounter and how you might overcome them.

5 Methods

The proposal should outline and justify your research methods. For many disciplines, the majority of research is desk based. If this is your case, you will need to articulate which online resources or books will help shape your project. If you plan to conduct field work or collect empirical data, you should provide details about this. This section should also explain how you hope to analyse your research findings.

6 Significance

PhDs are awarded for original research which adds to an existing body of knowledge. Therefore, a strong research proposal will demonstrate the originality of your intended research. You should therefore explain why your research is important and how it contributes to the existing knowledge in your field. It is in this section that you should be really trying to sell your idea and its value to the academic community, so be persuasive but also realistic.

7 Bibliography

Your proposal should include a short bibliography identifying the most relevant sources for your topic and any references that you have included in the proposal.

STYLE GUIDANCE

Before submitting your research proposal make sure to:

☐ **CHECK** guidance on university and college/departmental guidance websites for specific subject advice. Conventions differ across subjects so make sure you check the style guidance of the relevant department.

☐ **REFINE** and edit your proposal a number of times before it is submitted. It's important to demonstrate that you have given your proposal a lot of individual attention and care.

☐ **DEMONSTRATE** a clear sense of the purpose and direction of your research project.

☐ **DOUBLE-CHECK** your spelling and grammar – your proposal should be well written.

☐ **ENSURE** you leave the reader interested, excited and wanting to find out more about your ideas… and about you!

TOP TIP:

Follow the three Cs rule when writing your proposal. Before you submit, ask a friend to check that your writing is clear, concise and coherent.

CLEAR: is what you have written intelligible and clearly articulated? Does it make sense, or is it vague and confusing?

CONCISE: have you written your proposal in a succinct and focussed way?

COHERENT: does your proposal link together well so that it tells the reader a short story about what you want to do, why you want to do it and how you will do it?

COMMON MISTAKES

Common mistakes you should look out for when writing your research proposal include:

1. **Ignoring or neglecting** the wider academic context

2. **Losing focus –** remember to be persuasive and go into detail about your major arguments

3. **Poor proof-reading –** ensure you have referenced or cited consistently and checked your spelling and grammar.

NOTE...

A good research proposal is as long as it needs to be, but a rough guide would be somewhere between 1,000 and 2,500 words.

OTHER DOCUMENTS

Along with your proposal, you may also be asked to provide supporting documents:

Academic CV

An academic CV is similar to one you would use in the professional world, but there are extra features to consider:

- Your academic CV will not be as brief as a professional CV, but usually no more than four pages.

- Your academic CV should be tailored to each application.

- In terms of content, think about past research activities and interests.

- You could make reference to any publications, conferences attended/contributed to or funding you may have been awarded.

English language requirements

If English is not your first language, you will need to submit evidence of a good command of English before starting your degree programme. Find out more at:
exeter.ac.uk/pg-research/apply/english

Transcripts

Academic transcripts provide full details of subjects studied and grades/marks attained. If your transcript is not in English you should also supply a certified translation.

If you have not completed your degree yet, you will be asked to upload an interim transcript to show your grades so far.

References

For your application to be considered, you need to upload at least one reference from a referee who is in a position to comment on the standard of your academic work and suitability for independent research.

Important: make sure to check if your programme requires more than one reference

I love how much the university encourages collaboration between students - though we are researching different things, we assist and inspire each other.

Juliana,
Management Studies

YOUR APPLICATION JOURNEY

"I'd like to do a PhD"

Narrow down your subject area of interest to a novel question and create a draft research proposal.

Identify staff who share similar research interests. Contact them to discuss your research proposal and request supervision.

Refine and finalise your research proposal. Prepare your CV, transcripts and cover letter.

Submit your online application and await a decision.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

We warmly welcome international students and ensure that you have all the support you need, both before you arrive and during your studies, so you can make the most of your time in the UK.

Unaccompanied international fee paying students, starting their studies in September, are guaranteed an offer of first year accommodation providing they apply by the deadline.

Our International Students' Guide contains lots of useful information, from making a visa application, to what to expect when you get here including travel in the UK, the cost of living and considerations for students who will be accompanied by dependents. **exeter.ac.uk/dependants**

Supporting your language skills:

If you do not currently meet the university's English language requirements for direct entry to postgraduate study, pre-sessional study can help to raise your linguistic ability to the required standard for the degree programme. The INTO University of Exeter Centre, based on the Streatham Campus, offers intensive pre-sessional summer courses and year round academic English courses for a term or longer.

SAY HELLO!

Visit us in the UK, in your country or get involved with our interactive online sessions to find out more about life and study at the University of Exeter.

You can also use our online app to speak with current postgraduate students. Our online ambassadors are available to answer your questions and tell you about their own student experiences.
www.exeter.ac.uk/postgraduate/askastudent

❝ Transitioning into the UK higher education system was a big jump but it forced me to learn skills that are going to make me more competitive – the training, research skills and connections you make as a Postgraduate Researcher cannot be underestimated. ❞

Aleeha,
Masters by Research, Anthropology

OUR LOCATIONS

THINGS TO CONSIDER

Important Factors

Choosing where to do your research degree can be a complex decision, and there are a number of factors to consider, including:

- The reputation of the university

- The research expertise of the academic staff

- The relevant facilities and resources for your research area

- The type of lifestyle that is important to you (and any dependants you may have)

Funding

Finding funding for a research degree is a competitive process, but perseverance is key.

Examples of types of funding available for postgraduate research include:

- External funding bodies

- Government grants

- Private sector companies

- University funded scholarships and studentships

- Self-funding or charitable grants

Read more: exeter.ac.uk/pg-research

TOP TIP:

We **always** recommend contacting the college responsible for your discipline to discuss your idea with a potential supervisor before you write your research proposal or submit your application.

As a member of the Russell Group, we attract funding to support postgraduate research from all major research councils. We recognise that postgraduates are the future of research and invest heavily in university funded opportunities.

Search now: exeter.ac.uk/phdprojects

LAST THOUGHTS...

Remember that your research proposal should leave a positive first impression about your ability to complete a PhD with us.
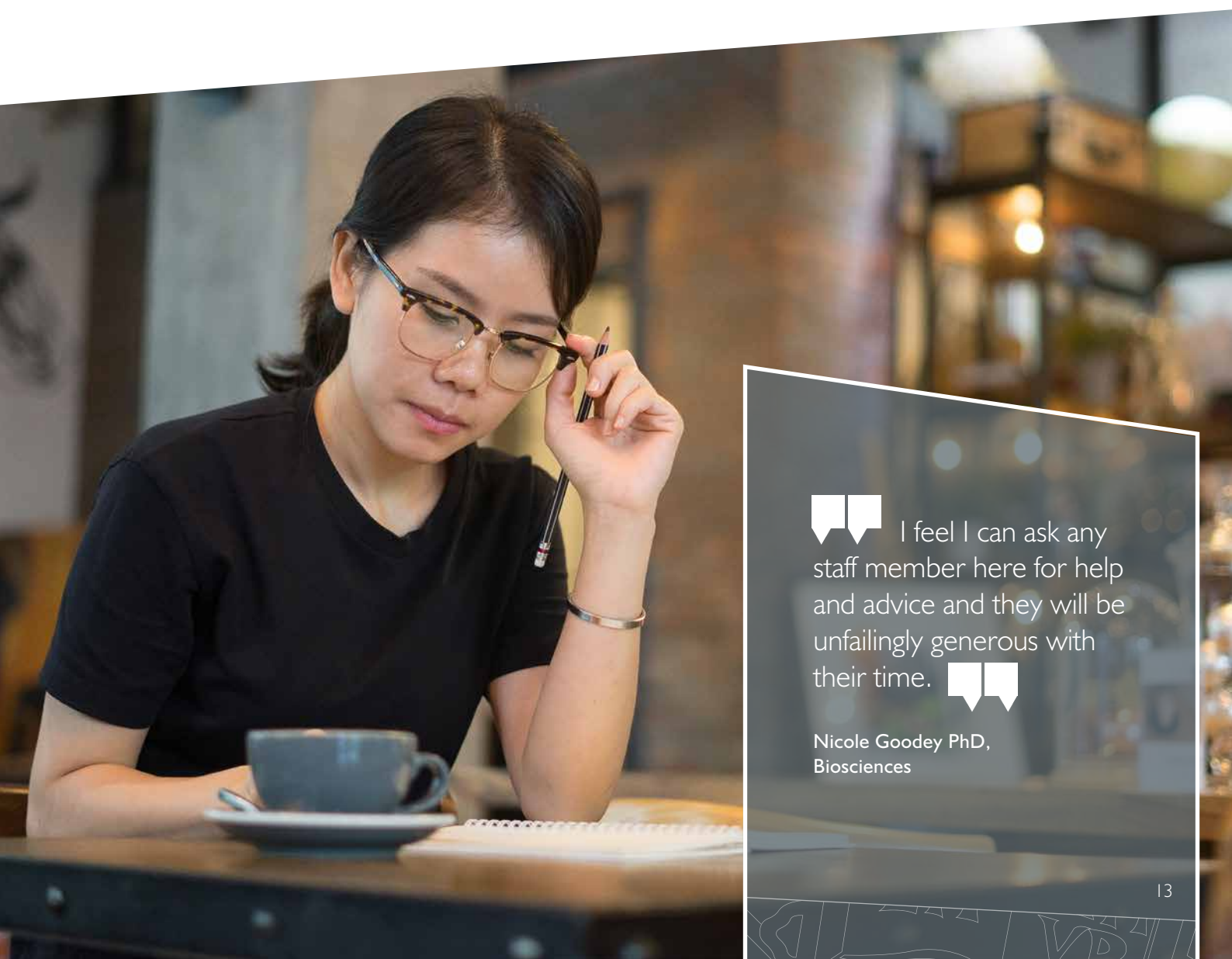
It is your project, so it is important to demonstrate leadership in this first stage of the application process. An excellent proposal should leave the reader feeling in no doubt that you are ready to tackle the challenges of a PhD.

Don't be a stranger...

Get in touch with us today to find out more about research at the University of Exeter.

exeter.ac.uk/enquiry

Apply online at **exeter.ac.uk/pg-research**

> I feel I can ask any staff member here for help and advice and they will be unfailingly generous with their time.

Nicole Goodey PhD, Biosciences

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information about writing research proposals and postgraduate study in general:

- www.exeter.ac.uk/pg-research

- FindaPhD.com

- Vitae.ac.uk

- Bell, J. Doing your Research Project: A Guide for First-time Researchers

- Baxter, L., 2010, How to Research (Open Up Study Skills)

- Cryer, P., 2006 The Research Student's Guide to Success

- Philips, E., 2015, How to get a PhD: A Handbook for Students and their Supervisors

- Hall, G., 2008, The Postgraduate Companion

- Bentley, P., 2012, The PhD Application Handbook: Revised Edition

- Denscombe, M., 2012, Research Proposals: A Practical Guide

Good Luck!

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