

Guidelines for Preparing a Research Proposal for Graduate Studies in the School of Law

Introduction

To apply for admission to either the MPhil or PhD programmes offered by the School of Law (SLW), each applicant is required to prepare and submit a research proposal. A research proposal can best be described as a "roadmap" of the intended project. It must set out the various components of the problem in enough detail in order to guide the evaluator(s) through the underlying assumptions, problems, arguments, questions and basic literature that would enable the evaluator(s) to make an informed decision about the viability of the project. In a sense, the research proposal can also be described as a kind of distillation of the envisaged thesis; obviously without all the nuances, analyses, arguments and conclusions that would constitute the final work.

Applicants are advised to consult the Research Degree Coordinator of the School of Law with regard to their proposed research topic and proposal, or to seek comments on the proposal from a faculty member with relevant expertise and/or research interests. Applicants who have already published their academic work - e.g. book chapters or journal articles - are also encouraged to submit a representative publication together with their application materials.

Contents of the Research Proposal

It is useful to keep in mind, when making decisions about your research topic and when you design the research proposal, that ultimately, an MPhil thesis must make a substantial contribution to knowledge in the particular subject area while a PhD thesis must make a substantial original contribution to knowledge in the subject area concerned. For a PhD thesis (approx. 100,000 words) your study must demonstrate originality and a mere reproduction of existing knowledge will not be enough. And for an MPhil thesis (approx. 45, 000 words), your contribution to the field of knowledge must be significant enough so as to demonstrate your research competency and command of the subject area. Applicants must therefore take care in choosing an appropriate research topic that will allow them to ultimately meet these criteria; a research topic that is relevant and warranting of further research, but is also narrow enough in scope to ensure the practical feasibility of the proposed study.

A research proposal usually includes the following key components, and is usually between 15 to 25 pages in length:

(a) Title

A working title for the proposed project (e.g. "A critical analysis of directors' fiduciary duties in comparative perspective").

(b) Abstract

A short, maximum 350 word summary of your research proposal.

(c) Background / Literature Review / Theoretical Foundation

A brief, but sufficiently detailed and comprehensive introduction outlining the general area of study and demonstrating your knowledge and competency in conversing about your subject area. This substantial part of the research proposal will therefore provide an overview of the existing literature and/or theory and current state of knowledge, as well as recent debates, controversies,

and/or new developments in the selected field of study. In addition, specific shortcomings or problem areas in the subject area will also be highlighted in order to contextualise the research question(s) and objectives that the proposed research project will focus on. It is vital that the evaluator of the research proposal is convinced that the applicant is aware of the current debates in the subject area, and that the applicant has read widely and inquisitively in order to gain the necessary insight into the subject matter at hand. A good background and solid literature review presuppose thorough preparation, reading, and pre-study. This will also enable the applicant to position the research proposal in terms of schools of thought, methodological approaches, and a general theoretical context. The preliminary title may also inform this aspect, for instance "critical analysis", "comparative study", "historical analysis", etc.

(d) Research Question(s)

After having outlined your subject area, it is necessary to articulate the primary (and secondary) research question(s) that will guide the research activity. A good research question (or hypotheses) is clear and concise, and will serve as a golden thread throughout the thesis, leading to the conclusion or conclusions and final proposals/answers.

(e) Rational and Objectives

Explain why this research project is a worthy undertaking and important for the particular field of study. Also provide a clear statement of the objectives or aims of the research, in other words, what you intend to achieve and the contribution that your research will make. Since postgraduate research is not intended to only be a summary of existing literature, but also to add value, it is important to clearly justify the intended research project. The rational does not have to be the invention of a totally new theory. It can take many different forms, as long as it is clear that the research will add some value to the field of law.

(f) Research Methodology

A particularly important part of a research proposal relates to the research methods that you intend to use in considering and answering the research question(s). These research methods must be explained and justified in sufficient detail, and must be appropriate for the purpose of the research project, in other words, it must be appropriate in answering the research question(s) posed, and in achieving the research aims and objectives identified. The background, basic problem statement, and literature review (see point (c) above) must be formulated in conjunction with the methodology section, since the background and basic problem will inevitably inform the chosen methodology. For instance, a critical analysis necessitates a certain theoretical approach, while a historical or comparative study will obviously require comparative or historical methods. In natural sciences and many social sciences it is customary to elaborate extensively on methodology; an aspect often neglected in legal studies. While it is not necessary to write extensively on methodology in a legal studies research proposal, it is advisable to explain in clear terms how the research problem will be tackled and why the particular approach or approaches were chosen.

(g) Chapter Outline and Timeline

A preliminary chapter outline and timeline for the proposed research project. The chapter outline sketches the structure of your thesis by providing a list of chapter headings with a short explanation on the content of each chapter. The chapter outline should carefully be considered

in order to reflect the flow and underlying argument of the thesis; building up to the final conclusion or recommendations.

The timeline provides a preliminary indication of the intended progress. Keep in mind the prescribed study periods for MPhil and PhD degree programmes: An MPhil degree normally takes 2 years to complete for full-time students and 4 years for part-time students. PhD students who already hold a research master's degree or a master's degree with a thesis/project/dissertation normally take 3 years full-time or 6 years part-time to complete the PhD programme. And PhD students without a research master's degree or a master's degree with a thesis/project/dissertation usually take 4 years full-time and 8 years part-time to complete the PhD programme.

(h) Bibliography

As a first step, list all the works cited in your proposal. Additionally, the bibliography of a research proposal is also indicative of whether the applicant is aware of the most important, and most recent primary and secondary sources of the subject area. Thus, the bibliography will normally include works read/cited and works that have been identified as potential sources. But the bibliography should not be seen as exhaustive, since the period of active writing may very well lead to the identification of new and additional sources.

A research proposal is an essential starting point for any research project, but it is also important to remember that the research process is dynamic, and it is therefore likely that adjustments and further refinements to the research proposal will transpire during the course of the research process.

The better the research proposal, the easier the writing process will be.

Please note: Applicants must write and submit their own work. Please ensure that you read through, and understand the City University of Hong Kong's Rules of Academic Honesty, available at http://www.cityu.edu.hk/provost/academic_honesty/rules_on_academic_honesty.htm.