

## School of Health Sciences & Social Care

### The Research Proposal

In addition to completing the application form, we also require you to provide us with a brief research proposal of approximately 2,000 words in length.

#### What is the purpose of a PhD Research Proposal?

The objectives of a doctoral research proposal are to demonstrate that the research you want to do with us is:

- Worth doing, i.e. there is a solid academic rationale for the project;
- Feasible, i.e. you are capable of doing it with the resources and skills you currently have or can reasonably expect to acquire;
- Properly designed i.e. the project has a suitable methodology and appropriate analytical/theoretical framework.

Research proposals must be concise and precise. They must show the reader what you want to do, why and how. They do not have to be perfect – research projects are expected to evolve over time. However, a good research proposal will save you time and effort later in the research process. It will help you have a clear focus. It will also help you plan your work properly and locate source material in plenty of time. Most importantly, preparing the research proposal will help you to decide if you have had sufficient training in research methods to be able to do an independent piece of research at PhD level.

#### Why do I need to write a research proposal as part of my application to Brunel?

In the United Kingdom, PhD degrees are awarded purely on the basis of a thesis, written by the student under the tutelage of a supervisor or supervisors. There is no taught element of the PhD degree in the UK, unlike in some countries where taught elements of the programme are included in the assessment regime. Thus, when you apply to do a PhD at Brunel, it is critical for us to establish whether your proposal is likely to set out a research project that is capable of PhD standards. Reading a proposal gives us a much better idea of what exactly a potential student wants to do, and whether and how we can help with their research project – particularly, whether we have members of staff with suitable expertise to provide supervision. Writing such a proposal also obliges applicants to think seriously about their research project, to test whether their initial ideas are actually sustainable over a 3 or 4 year registration period, and whether their undergraduate or Masters course has provided sufficient training in research methods to enable independent research.

## What is expected in the research proposal?

Your proposal must explicitly contain the information listed under the headings below. The Proposal must be no more than 2000 words, with a separate reference list (which is not counted in the word limit). Please use a clear font such as Arial, with margins no less than 2 cm on the left side and 1.5 cm on all other sides. Because you will be judged primarily on your study design and the information you provide on your proposed methods and framework for analysis, it is recommended that the background/ literature review takes up no more than 800 words.

### **Name**

#### ***Discipline area of proposed study***

Are you proposing to do a study in biosciences, physiotherapy, social work, occupational therapy, or any of the sub-disciplines such as gerontology?

### **Title**

A concise title is necessary at the end of the project; a looser one is fine in a proposal. It is important that the title is a reasonably good reflection of what you propose to do.

#### ***Background/ literature review***

The literature review does not need to be systematic or comprehensive, but it does need to lead the reader to the aim of the study. What is the issue you want to explore? Why is it worth exploring? What value will it add to existing knowledge and scholarship? By the time the reader has reached the end of the review he or she should be convinced that the research proposed fills a gap in the academic literature and is worth conducting. It is also a good idea to point to one or more theories that might provide the theoretical underpinning for the research. The review should include academic references.

### **Aims**

The aim should consist of a broad statement concerned with the purpose of the study.

#### ***Research Questions/Hypotheses/Objectives***

Depending on the nature of the study proposed, you next need to provide the reader with more detailed information about your aim. This is done either by listing research questions, hypotheses or objectives. Although some research designs demand hypotheses (e.g. experiments), for other designs research questions or objectives are acceptable. Framing the issues that you are interested in by formulating clear research questions helps you to think very carefully about whether or not your study's design will enable an answer. Please do not have both research questions and objectives.

### **Methods**

In the method section you should describe your study's design, sample and your procedures. To help you think about your proposal we suggest that you use the following sub-headings under the methods section:

#### **Design**

For example, is the proposed study an experiment, survey, evaluation of an intervention, case study, or qualitative study of a single group? Will one phase (such as an interview phase) lead on to another phase (such as a questionnaire survey)?

### **Sample and sampling**

How many people do you plan to have in your sample? What is their age range? Gender? How will the sample be generated?

### **Procedures**

How exactly is the data to be generated? Face to face interviews? Questionnaires? Will you be using standardized measures? If so, which ones? Have they been validated? Will they be developed through discussion with service users?

### **Framework for Analysis**

It is very important that you state how you plan to analyze the data generated. While we are aware that doing a PhD is training in research methods, we need to have some idea as to the level you will be working at in order to assign you a supervisory team. Are you, for example, planning to use parametric or non-parametric statistics? If you are planning a qualitative study it would be helpful to know which approach you think might be most suitable, for example, IPA, grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenology, etc.. The more detail that you can provide, the easier it will be for us to decide on the types of support you will need. Please do not suggest a poorly thought out 'scattergun' approach, listing many statistics without a clear purpose.

### ***Theoretical framework:***

A statement and justification of the chosen theoretical underpinning for your study needs to be provided. One of the main differences between a masters dissertation and a PhD dissertation is that a PhD is expected to have a theoretical underpinning and make a contribution to theory development. There are, of course, some areas of research that place more importance on theory. One might not expect a strong theoretical underpinning in a doctorate in epidemiology, but one would expect to see theoretical links in a study in the social sciences. It is recognized that it is difficult to know which theoretical approach might be best at the start of a dissertation, but we need to know what you know about the theories prevalent in the field you intend to study and whether or not you intend to investigate a particular theory.

### ***Ethical concerns or issues***

Are there ethical problems with your proposed research strategy (e.g. acquisition and use of data issues; confidentiality; cultural issues; accountability)? How will you address them? Please keep in mind that you will need School Ethical Committee Approval before you can approach human study participants. If you plan to use patients or people receiving social work services you will also need NHS Ethical Committee Approval. It can take up to a year to obtain the necessary approvals from the NHS. This needs to be carefully considered as it could markedly slow down your progress in your first year.

### ***Strategies for overcoming possible problems:***

Can you be sure you can get access to sufficient source material? If there are financial costs for your data collection, how will they be met? Do you need to travel outside Brunel? How will you fund this? Do you need to access material in languages other than English? Is your project dependent on access to primary sources or particular material unavailable at Brunel University? If so, how will you get this information?

### ***Work schedule:***

It is important that you provide a timeline of tasks that structures your work between completing the proposal and the date of submission. British PhDs typically take 3 years to complete, often longer. There will be a Transfer Event near the end of your first year in which a fairly formal panel will meet to consider your progress from MPhil registration to PhD. For the Transfer Event you must provide all your written materials and do an oral presentation using Powerpoint. The panel members will ask you questions. It is generally expected that by the time of the Transfer Event

you will have finalized your study proposal in detail, have completed a literature review (this does not have to be the final version but it needs to be written to a high standard), have ethical approvals and letters of access, and have completed some piloting. There is, of course, variation in what is expected by this stage, depending on the nature of your research topic.

***Reference list (not included in the word limit)***

References may be done in either the Harvard or Vancouver style.

**When is the proposal due?**

As part of your application to Brunel, a research proposal should be attached with the relevant forms.

**Can I get help with the proposal?**

Yes. You should consult with the academic staff of your present/most recent university. If you wish to study in a particular area of research, with a particular person, you may contact that person to discuss your proposal. He or she will provide comments on the feasibility of the study and may provide assistance on preparing the study proposal. However, since one of the main aims of having you prepare a proposal is to see if you are likely to complete the work on time and to do work of a quality sufficiently high to merit the award of a PhD, it is expected that you write the proposal yourself. There are, of course, circumstances in which research students do not prepare proposals and that is when they are attached to ongoing research grants.

**Is there any taught preparation for a PhD?**

Yes and No. Research students who have not already had such training can attend courses on research methods which are provided by the Graduate School. It might also be possible to attend courses provided by other Schools. Those planning to do a MPhil/PhD in biosciences will be provided with specific training. Those planning to do a MPhil/PhD in health sciences or social care do not receive special training, but will be advised on the best ways to bring their research skills up to the required standard. However, if you did not receive sufficient training in research methods to do a traditional UK PhD, we strongly advise that you do a Masters in research methods. You also need to recognize that even if you have done a taught masters degree, it might not have provided sufficient training in research methods, nor given you experience in independent research.

It is only in exceptional circumstances that we take MPhil/PhD students straight from an undergraduate degree. You would need to be not only from a very good university and have top grades, but you would need to demonstrate that you had been well-trained in research methods before we would allow people with only undergraduate degrees to register for a research degree.

**Can I conduct my project wholly overseas (away from Brunel University)?**

There are numerous difficulties (academic, practical, ethical) in adequately supervising projects which are conducted at a distance from the UK. Therefore the university will only supervise PhD students who are conducting all of their data collection outside of the UK, if we have strong academic links with local academic supervisors in the host country. The academic supervisor at a university near to where the research is to be conducted will then work jointly with the supervisor at Brunel University. Students may need to pay additional fees to this local supervisor. The local supervisor would have to be approved by Brunel University, and have recognised expertise in the research topic.