Guidelines for Writing a Research Proposal
University of Essex
School of Law

Aims and objectives of the guidelines

Writing a good proposal from the outset is crucial to helping us assess the value and relevance of the research and the person most able to supervise your research. The lack of a clear proposal can lead to rejection, or to requests to further explain your ideas; thereby delaying the School’s decision on whether or not to accept your application. The process of planning and writing the proposal will also help to clarify your thinking.

To help you focus your research and formulate a successful proposal you may find it useful to consider the following guidelines before submitting an application to undertake research leading to an MPhil/PhD in the School of Law.

Topics and issues to consider

1) Length of proposal
As a guide, the proposal should be of approximately 2,000 to 4,000 words. Please bear in mind that the clearer and fuller your explanation, the easier it is for us to assess the quality, value, and practicality of your proposed research.

Experience shows that short proposals (about 2 to 3 pages) are often weak proposals. Overly long proposals, on the other hand, often show a lack of clarity of the ideas underlying the proposed research.

It is important to note that the proposed length does not include the bibliography. You may therefore find it useful to attach a separate document listing the materials you have read or which are relevant to your field of research.

2) The proposed title

The title should convey the main theme, hypothesis or question addressed by the proposed research. If your research involves a comparative analysis, the title should reflect this approach whenever possible. Your title should be consistent with the explanation of the project.

3) Background information which led you to submit your MPhil/PhD application

It is important to explain the context of your project. Please explain the issues that gave rise to the questions you wish to explore. What, for instance, is the problem you are seeking to address and why is it important to address this problem? This may require you to summarise relevant events,
legal developments, or debates in academic literature. In particular, it is crucial to explain what is innovative in your proposal and approach. You will also need to identify the legal and other materials (international or national) on which you propose to draw. Remember we will assess the application in terms of its legal value. It is therefore important to explain your source materials, rather than simply provide a journalistic account of situations; however important or relevant they may be to your wish to undertake research in this area.

Furthermore, if you are considering issues involving your home country (non UK), you need to explain why you intend to study with us at Essex. In this context, it is important to be as specific as possible and to avoid generalities, such as the reputation of the University or its ranking in research. However, if we have particular expertise or facilities that will benefit your work, then this is worth noting and explaining.

More generally, if you are coming the UK to study, it is important to explain what studying in the UK will offer your research – for example how the UK’s legal approach to a given subject may help you in your analysis of the issue. Moreover, if you intend to take a comparative approach this must be clearly stated and explained. We are unlikely to be able accept proposals which only refer to non UK, non international legal instruments.

### 4) Key questions

Having identified the factual and legal background of your intended research, the next step is to explain the issues you propose to examine and to present them clearly. A PhD is an original piece of research and so you should demonstrate that your proposed area has not been studied before - or not in the way that you propose.

It is very helpful when assessing a project to see how candidates propose to address the issues they have identified and a brief outline of the main stages of the project is important, including a brief overview of the stages you expect to reach on a term by term basis. As well as addressing the main issues to be studied you should also explain the following matters.

### 5) Relevant literature

You should show that you have already done some reading and thinking about the issues and support this with a brief assessment of your knowledge of the relevant literature to date. References to key articles and texts should indicate your appreciation of their relevance to your research area; and a good proposal will make an effort to explain what your own research will add to the existing literature. However, this section is not about summarising each article or book on the subject. There is no need to provide an abstract to documents already published. Rather, the aim of the section is to underline the relevance of your questions, by briefly explaining the relevant current debates and how you propose to develop them.
6) Methodology

It is important to provide an explanation how you intend to research the issues you have identified. If, for example you intend to adopt a comparative approach you should state the comparative law method(s) you intend to use and why a comparison of the different legal system you propose to study is significant.

If you contemplate field research, you need to show that you have given some thought to why and how you will go about this. For example, if you propose to conduct interviews as part of your research, you need to explain their purpose, who (or what officials) are likely to be interviewed, how interviewees will be selected, and how the interviews are to be conducted. Simply to say that you want to interview and use a questionnaire is unlikely to be enough. Some thought should also be given to the need to obtain access to certain interviews and how this will be obtained. Many of these matters will be considered in greater detail if you undertake the study – the purpose at this stage is to show that you have started to think about the practical aspects of the proposed work. This type of field work can be very time consuming. In assessing the feasibility of your project and the likelihood that you will complete your PhD on time, careful thought must be given to the timescale of your research.

In some cases you may also have to consider ethical issues, especially if you plan to work with potentially confidential information or to involve vulnerable people or children.

We hope that these guidelines will help you to submit a successful proposal, we wish you good luck and we look forward to receiving your application. If you have any further questions please do not hesitate to contact the School of Law.