

Discipline of Politics and International Relations

Guidelines for PhD full thesis proposal¹

The requirements

Writing a full proposal and having it approved by the discipline's Graduate Committee are formal requirements of the provisional year. The PhD statute, clause 5a(ii), requires that you:

Complete a full thesis proposal, including a provisional title, a schedule of research, an outline of the thesis structure and a statement of the resources required to complete the research.

The thesis proposal should be submitted for approval to the appropriate postgraduate committee of the Department, Institute and/or Faculty in which the candidate is registered. The committee may accept the proposal, or indicate changes needed to the candidate and supervisor/s and request a resubmission, or it may decline to accept the proposal. It will inform the Head of Department of its decision.

In the Discipline of Politics and International Relations PhD candidates are expected to give a departmental seminar approximately nine months into their first year. (A conference presentation does not count in lieu of this presentation). In the seminar candidates will present their research proposal to other PhD students and the academic staff, including members of the Graduate Committee, all of whom may offer constructive feedback. The full thesis proposal should take account of relevant feedback and then be completed and submitted to Graduate Committee by 10 months from initial enrolment. Minor revisions if necessary can then be made in time for the provisional year report at 12 months from enrolment.

Writing the proposal

The transition from an idea for a thesis to a well-defined proposal is frequently the most difficult task of the research project, but also potentially the most rewarding. This is the time when you are exploring your field of interest, reading about your topic-area, narrowing and focussing your topic, and formulating the questions for study. This requires independent thinking but when writing the proposal you should also be consulting with your supervisor and co-supervisor.

Of necessity, any PhD research topic will be specialised and relate to specific areas of the subject-matter, literature and methodologies of the disciplines of politics and international relations. However, since the proposal must receive the approval of the Graduate Committee it should be not only be rigorous but also clear enough to be understood by members of staff whose expertise may not be in the topic, theory, or methodology you have selected. You should discuss with your supervisor and co-supervisor the material you plan to submit and secure their support before submission. In case of uncertainty, your supervisor can consult the Graduate Committee regarding appropriate material for submission.

A research proposal should be approximately 6000 words exclusive of bibliography and footnotes. Note that the proposal is distinct from the 'substantial piece of written work' to be submitted as a further provisional goal, which may be longer and more substantive. The substantial piece of written work could take the form of a literature review, an historical background, or a theoretical, conceptual, or methodological exploration.

To repeat: a good proposal is the gateway to success. As well as securing approval for continuation of your PhD registration, and indicating and guiding your subsequent research, its substance can later inform or constitute part of the introduction or other chapters of your thesis.

Structuring the proposal

The proposal should have a structure which includes the following components, although the sub-headings you choose may be different from those listed below. The most important thing to remember is that you should provide the necessary information in a clear and coherent way.

a) Title

Obvious but important. The title shapes expectations and should be clear and informative, without being overlong.

b) Summary or introduction to the topic

This is a page or so which summarises the context of your research and what you will do in the research project.

c) Research problem, question, or hypothesis

This states what the research project will deal with. If hypotheses are appropriate they should be stated, along with the rationale. If the problem is not one in which a hypothesis is appropriate, then the problem, question or theme should be clearly stated and amplified. Sub-questions might also be added here if appropriate.

d) Importance of the research topic

A requirement of a PhD thesis is that it makes an original contribution to knowledge. Thus, you need to show how the proposed research is sufficiently important to justify your efforts (and the efforts of those you involve in your research). This should include a statement of how the solution to the problem, or answer to the question, or validation of the theme, can influence the field.

e) Significant prior research

This should be comprehensive enough to demonstrate that you are aware of the major relevant sources of information. Most research projects arise out of considerable prior research, which should be summarised. You need to show the relationship between your question or problem (in b above) and this prior research. This is where you might include short sections of your literature review for example.

f) Research design (conceptual, theoretical and methodological frameworks)

This section describes how you intend to answer your question and it should be as explicit as possible. Some theses are primarily theoretical or conceptual in orientation and others draw on a particular conceptual framework that directs the choice of methodology employed. The notion of methodology incorporates a wide range of possible approaches to the collection and analysis of information, from the case study or comparative method in empirical research to the analysis of concepts in theoretical research. Many projects will involve varying combinations of descriptive, analytical and normative approaches, and all projects should be informed by relevant theory, logic, and literature. The choice of method should be justified in terms of the question being asked.

In setting out the chosen method, particular techniques of data collection and analysis should be described as explicitly as possible. Detailed description does not preclude later changes in method, but you should demonstrate that you have given considerable thought to the practicalities of the conduct of your research. Certain methods lend themselves to far more advance specification than others. For

example, if a sample of people or documents is to be drawn, procedures for choosing the sample should be described and justified. If a questionnaire or interview is to be used it should be explained and possible examples of the major types of questions be asked should be described. However, for any method you should be able to indicate the kinds of information to be gathered, the types of materials to be used, and the forms of data collection.

You should indicate the resources you will need and utilise in carrying out your research and how you anticipate acquiring them, where these go beyond the provisions of the resources statement agreed with the department as part of the application process. You should also indicate the location of your information gathering, particularly where this will involve travel away from Auckland, saying what steps have already been taken to facilitate this part of your research (for instance, identifying sources, locating archives, and applying for funding). This should also form part of your timeline for research (see below).

If there are major questions of method and approach yet to be decided these should be noted. This is one of the most important sections of your proposal because it demonstrates your understanding of the steps and skills necessary to undertake the research.

g) Analysis of information

In this section you should describe how you will determine from the information you have gathered the answer(s) to your question(s). In other words, 'How will you figure out what it all means?' For example, if you plan to use a case study approach, describe how you intend to identify the key themes and patterns in your data and the procedures you will use to check the validity of your analysis.

h) Ethical considerations

All university research is expected to conform to acceptable ethical standards and proposals for research which involve human participants must be approved before the research commences by the University of Auckland Human Subjects Ethics Committee.

Ethical concerns arise in both the ways research is conducted and the ways the research findings may later be used. Areas of responsibility towards research subjects - for example, the securing of informed consent, confidentiality, preservation of anonymity, and avoidance of deception or adverse effects - must be taken into account at the planning stage of the research and the strategies for addressing them included in the methodology. While politicians and officials generally do not fall into a category of vulnerable subjects, you should not assume ethics approval is not required and should seek advice, initially from your supervisor.

A proposal for research involving Māori and minority groups or communities should demonstrate that the researcher has conducted adequate background preparation for working in that area. It should also indicate the extent to which members of that group or community will be involved or consulted in the overall supervision of the project and the dissemination of the research findings.

i) Limitations and key assumptions

This section of a paragraph or two defines the limits of your research. It is common for students to try to do too much. This section is useful in defining how much you will undertake, and the key assumptions that you will follow in building your argument, or your model, or in conducting your experiment. Again be specific. Make statements such as. "This argument assumes that...", and "This research will not...".

i) References or bibliography

Major readings cited in the proposal or which serve to indicate the context of the proposed research should be listed at the end. The extent of your bibliography may

depend on whether you separately submit a literature review as the substantial piece of written work to be completed as a provisional goal.

j) Structure of the thesis

You should provide an outline of the thesis structure, usually in the form of a list of chapter headings and subsidiary section headings. These will be subject to later change but will help shape your thoughts and confirm that you are considering the structure of the thesis as a whole, including the all-important writing process as well as the information collection part of the research.

k) Schedule of research

You should append a timeline indicating the expected progress of your research, including time to be spent engaged in research away from Auckland. It is appreciated that this will be provisional and subject to revision, but it should be detailed enough to serve as a useful guide.

Planning for success

The proposal is a plan for the student to follow but it also provides the supervisor, the co-supervisor and the Graduate Committee with the information they need to approve or suggest modifications to the research project. If the proposal is clear and credibly grounded as regards theory, methodology, and evidence, approval of the research project implies that, providing the research is properly conducted and soundly documented, there is a high probability that the final thesis can be completed expeditiously and pass examination successfully.

Students should be aware that the first proposal is often not the final one. A process of refining usually occurs in which reviews, critical comments and suggestions made by supervisors and others are incorporated into revised drafts.

In developing a proposal it is useful to remind yourself of what the examiners will be looking for in the final thesis when you have completed it. In a good thesis the following elements can be traced back to the proposal.

- an original contribution to knowledge
- evidence of the discovery of new knowledge or the exercise of independent judgement
- literary presentation
- original work of merit worth of publication
- evidence of competence in independent research
- understanding of concepts, issues, techniques and methodology
- critical use of published work and source materials.

7 March 2011
rev 22 April 2015

¹ These guidelines were informed by those devised by the Faculty of Education. See www.education.auckland.ac.nz/uaa/home/about/programmes/postgraduate-programmes/phd-in-education/-guidelines-for-phd-full-research-proposals