

Department of Sociology
Guidelines for PhD full thesis proposal¹
September 2012

In brief

- Full thesis proposal ‘normally completed within 6 months’ (provisional goal) and submitted to the supervisor.
- Approval of proposal by the department’s Graduate Committee is required for confirmation of PhD registration at 12 months (as part of the doctoral provisional year review).

The requirements

Doctoral study is intellectually demanding and time-consuming but the challenges of seeing the project through to completion are eased substantially by the development of a full research proposal. 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.

The *Doctoral Handbook* adds (p. 31):

Your thesis proposal has an important purpose for you as a researcher. By establishing your central research question or topic, gaining a sense of the existing field of study and foreseeing some of the challenges you may face, you will be in a much better position to undertake productive research.

Your proposal is a guideline that will help you navigate your way through what is often a difficult journey.

PhD students in the Faculty of Arts are required to meet the provisional goal of completing the proposal ‘normally within the first six months’. For students enrolled in the Department of Sociology, the provisional review at the end of the first year is the final date for approving the research proposal, as part of the process of checking that all the compulsory provisional goals have been met. This is when the department’s Graduate Committee will complete the formal signing off on the proposal. Earlier submission of the proposal, however, allows time for assessment, comment, advice and, if necessary, revision. You should aim to submit a draft of the proposal to your supervisor in six months. Keeping to time in the first year is the key to later success.

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 around the area, narrowing down your topic, and formulating the question(s) for study. This requires independent study but in writing the proposal you should also be working closely with your supervisor and co-supervisor.

¹ This document has been adopted from a Department of Political Studies of the same name.

Of necessity, any PhD research topic will be specialised and relate to one or more specific areas of the subject-matter, literature and methodologies of sociology and criminology. However, since the proposal must receive the approval of the Graduate Committee, it should not only be rigorous but also be clear enough to be understood by members of staff whose expertise may not be in the topic you have selected.

A full research proposal should be 5000-8000 words long. Its length will vary depending on the nature of the research and on other material you plan to submit for the provisional review. In addition to the proposal, you are required to complete at least one substantial piece of written work within 12 months as a further provisional goal. You therefore need to decide, for example, whether a literature review will form part of the proposal or be submitted separately as part of a completed chapter surveying the field, considering theories and methods, and so on. The provisional review in the Department of Sociology takes a holistic view of your submissions, which should in total amount to 10,000 words or more. You should discuss with your supervisor the material you plan to submit and secure their support before submission. In case of uncertainty, your supervisor can consult the PhD advisor regarding appropriate material for submission.

As already indicated, 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 form part of the introduction or other chapters of your thesis. The investment in writing a good proposal will be repaid; it is not something to be written then put in a drawer.

Structuring the proposal

The proposal should have a structure which attends to the following components. You do not have to follow slavishly the divisions, labels and order indicated below but you should provide the necessary information in a clear and coherent way. If any element is to be covered in separate material to be submitted for the provisional review you should indicate this in the proposal (and ensure it *is* covered). Your supervisor can advise on any variation and offer further guidance on each component.

a) Title

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

b) 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 or question should be clearly stated and explained.

c) Importance of the research topic

A PhD thesis must make 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, can influence the field.

d) Review of 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.

e) Research methodology and methods

This section describes how you intend to answer your question and it should be as explicit as possible. 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 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 advanced 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 to be asked should be described. 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, applying for funding etc). 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.

f) 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. Evidence of such approval is also required at your provisional review.

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, avoidance of deception or adverse effects, etc - must be taken into account at the planning stage of the research and the strategies for addressing them included in the methodology.

A proposal for research involving Māori, minority groups or vulnerable communities should demonstrate that the researcher has had adequate background preparation for working in that area. It should also indicate the extent to which members of that group/community will be involved or consulted in the overall supervision of the project and the dissemination of the research findings. This is particularly the case for research involving Māori, where the ethics committee will seek to ensure that the research incorporates the spirit of the Treaty of Waitangi.

g) Plans for the analysis of data

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) Research limitations and key assumptions

This section should briefly define the limits of your research without being defensive. 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. Be specific.

i) Proposed thesis structure

You should include 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.

j) 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.

k) References

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

Planning for success

When 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:

- a distinct contribution to knowledge
- evidence of the discovery of new knowledge or the exercise of independent judgement
- literary presentation
- original work of merit worthy of publication
- evidence of competence and coherence in independent research
- understanding of concepts, issues, techniques and methodology
- critical use of published work and source materials (see PhD Statute clause 1 (e))

It takes work to ensure your research achieves these goals. 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. It may also be useful to attend relevant Doctoral Skills programme workshops.

Finally, 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 and/or suggest modifications to the research project. If the proposal is highly explicit, approval of the research project implies that, providing the research is properly conducted and clearly documented, there is a high probability of the final thesis being successfully completed.