WRITING A PHD RESEARCH PROPOSAL IN THE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK AND APPLIED HUMAN SCIENCES

The research proposal should describe the research problem, specify its importance and detail the methods to be used and why they are appropriate. The document should be no more than 8000 words. It should contain sufficient information for committee members to assess the degree to which the student:

- is familiar with the background and history of the problem
- has assessed the strengths and weaknesses of previous work in the area
- has clarified the focus of the study and developed an appropriate conceptual framework and rationale
- is proposing appropriate methods and procedures to answer the research question
- will make a contribution to the literature
- has suggested time frames that are appropriate to the nature of the thesis.

The type of document required will depend on the topic selected and the method chosen. There are no set formulas for writing a successful research proposal. Students should consult their advisors regarding the requirements for their own particular thesis area. Students are expected to have read widely and have written a well organised literature review before they embark on their proposal. The literature review conducted by the student is likely to be reduced for inclusion in the research proposal. If students wish to include a more detailed literature review it can be placed in an appendix and referred to in the body of the proposal.

The terms used in the University Guidelines are discussed more fully below:

A clear statement of the research
A clear statement of the research provides the reader with an accurate overview of the primary purpose of the study (what it is about, why you want to do it, why it is significant, what you hope it will achieve). It is important to make a clear statement of the purpose of the study early in the proposal otherwise the reader is constantly attempting to discover what the study is about. In discussing the significance of the study the student may wish to highlight two possible issues - the contribution to knowledge and/or the application to practice or policy.

A critical review of the literature
A critical review of the literature involves the student in a thorough search of relevant literature. This search will likely involve reading research reports, research discussions, theoretical debates and scholarly discussions generally. The purpose of the literature review is to establish the state of conceptual understanding/knowledge on the subject in question. The literature review should assist the student to identify the nature of the links between the proposed study and existing understandings.

The literature should be used skilfully to support, explain and illuminate the choices made for the proposed study, not to display how thoroughly the student has read the literature, or to educate the reader on the state of knowledge in the area under discussion. Support for the study may emerge from gaps in the literature, gaps in theory, poor research design, or inadequate analysis. A critical review of the literature
draws on relevant knowledge, critiques aspects of the knowledge base and in doing so proposes an improved, or different plan of action. At the earliest possible stage students should systematically record complete citations for every item of their reading.

A statement of the research methodology/and or discussion of the evidence to date
Proposals should include a description of the procedures to be employed. Proposals that involve empirical research should clearly demonstrate in a methodology section how data will be collected. The methodology section is one of the most important sections of the proposal as the quality of the methods used impacts on the quality of the data and the subsequent results. The approach taken depends on the purpose of the study, however, in all cases a step-by-step set of instructions should be presented. This requires a description of the type of general research approach used, such as descriptive or exploratory study, with procedures for collecting data, such as survey or in-depth interviewing and with an explanation of data analysis procedures. The instruments and techniques for measurement should be included. The target population and sampling methods to be used should be identified and discussed. Problems of poor response rates, or participants dropping out of the study should be flagged and decisions proposed as to how such events will be countered. It may be appropriate to conduct a pilot study (for qualitative studies this may also involve the analysis of data to enable procedures to be developed for data management, data reduction and display).

Proposals with a theoretical or philosophical emphasis need to explain the anticipated process of engaging with other viewpoints and developing one’s own ideas. Various strategies should be illuminated sufficient to demonstrate an ability to follow a line of inquiry and to carry it forward. A defence/ rationale for the proposed approach chosen in preference to other relevant approaches is required, in relation to both the literature and the aims.

A research plan detailing the work required to complete the thesis and a timetable of the work to be done
The tasks involved in preparation of the thesis should be broken down into various sections such as literature review, methodology, methods of inquiry, pilot study, data collection, writing first drafts of chapters and so on. These procedures should then be specified in terms of months and years left until submission. It is often a good idea to overestimate the time needed rather than underestimate as often tasks take much longer than anticipated.

An estimation of the resources required, if any
The type of resources required depends on the nature of the thesis. Often the resources relate to data collection. If you plan a qualitative thesis and plan to transcribe the data yourself then there is likely to be little need of additional resources. If you plan a quantitative study that involves mailing, or telephoning participants then resources are likely to be needed. The research proposal should contain an estimate of the resources required to the extent that this is possible.
A useful approach to the outline of the proposal appears below in an example of a Table of Contents for a proposal document.

I  BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY
II  INTRODUCTION:
   RATIONALE
   PURPOSE
III  REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND RELATED THEORY/ RESEARCH:
   CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
IV  METHODOLOGY:
   THEORY DEVELOPMENT OR RESEARCH APPROACH ADOPTED
   CENTRAL THEORETICAL/RESEARCH QUESTIONS
   IDEA GENERATION STRATEGY OR DATA COLLECTION
   PROCEDURES
V   APPROACH TO ANALYSIS
VI  TIME FRAME AND RESOURCES REQUIRED
VII  ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The above is one approach to the table of contents. Students should discuss the content and format of the research proposal with their advisors.

Useful Sites

The following websites might be useful in preparing a proposal document.

UQ PhD writing site provides useful information on writing a PhD including detail on the stages, entry points and frequently asked questions. Under “Information” there is a section on writing a proposal, useful examples of a literature review and advice regarding grammar and style.
http://www.tedi.uq.edu.au/phdwriting/

The Style Guide Website provides detail on citation styles.