

Generic Research Proposal Structure for a PhD Application

General Guidance

It is recognised that each academic School will have slightly different expectations in terms of the content of a research proposal. If you are unclear about how to construct a proposal for your preferred academic School, you should seek the advice of the School based Research Degree Coordinator. You should also explore if the academic School has available supervisory capacity in the broad area you are proposing. If not, it is sometimes possible to amend your proposed topic to better align with existing capacity in the academic School. The guidance below provides a broad expectation of what your proposal should entail, in terms of structure and content.

All applicants must submit a research proposal that should be in the range of 1500 - 3000 words i.e. 4-10 pages of A4. The appropriate length will be discipline specific. The academic School will use the research proposal to assess the quality and originality of your ideas, your skills in critical thinking and the feasibility of the research project. Think carefully about the scope of your research and be prepared to explain how you will complete it within the timeframe for a PhD or Professional Doctorate e.g. 4 years full time or 6 years part time.

Your proposal will be used to assess your expertise in the area in which you want to conduct research, your knowledge of the existing literature (and how

your proposed topic will enhance it). The proposal is also used by the academic School to assess and assign appropriate supervision teams.

If you are given a conditional/unconditional offer, it is possible that original proposal will evolve and that is a perfectly natural process in doctorate study. It is useful to view your proposal as an initial outline rather than a summary of the 'final product'.

Structure of the Research Proposal

1. Explanation of why the student wishes to undertake their studies at the Robert Gordon University

You should explain why you have chosen RGU and the academic School for your proposed study. Please provide contact details of any member of academic staff with whom you have had preliminary discussions as this will help to speed up consideration of your application.

2. Proposed Study Title/Area of Research Interest

The proposed title should be concise and clearly articulate the scope and key focus of your proposed research.

3. Rationale and background

You should include a short section outlining the general subject area, the background of the research and specific aspects of the topic to be investigated. Provide a rationale for conducting the proposed research and why it is relevant. The academic School's web pages should give you some guidance in terms of its current research strategy and consider how your proposal might complement this.

It is important to establish a convincing framework for your research in this section. You should include:

- Research questions or hypotheses (up to 3)
- Major approach you will take and rationale for doing so
- Significance of the research (in terms of academic originality or contribution to professional practice)

4. Study Aims and Objectives

The aim should express the overall intention of the research while the objectives express the various elements of investigation necessary to achieve this aim.

5. Literature Review

Your proposed research must be grounded in relevant literature outlining relevant research, theory and/or practice existing in the field and reviewed critically. Ideally, the sources should be peer-reviewed journal articles. In general, the literature review should evaluate to core or recent work, not simply describe it. Your review should demonstrate a good awareness of what else is going on in the field and how it relates to what you are proposing.

For example, you may be arguing that there is a significant gap in knowledge, or that this is a new issue where there is less knowledge, or that previous research is out of date.

6. Proposed Research Methods (if known)

This section should lay out clearly the way in which you will structure your research and the methods you will use. Depending on your subject discipline, research design may include (but is not limited to):

- The parameters of the research (e.g. the definition of the subject matter)
- A discussion of the overall approach and your rationale for adopting certain methods
- A brief discussion of the timeline for achieving your research

Include a concise discussion of your proposed research methodology and whether the approach is qualitative or quantitative. Consider any specific resources you might need for collecting and analysing data, highlighting any specific equipment/software and a brief rationale for adopting these methods.

7. Benefits, contributions and knowledge and/or applications of the findings

8. References/Bibliography

A full reference list must be included with your proposal, formatted in Harvard style (for The Law School; OSCOLA). Highlight any recent/relevant prior study in the area. Your proposal will be submitted to Turnitin, so ensure you have properly cited or fully acknowledged sources. Adopt a formal writing style and use the third person (e.g. refer to yourself as the “researcher”).

9. Career aspirations/motivation for the desire to gain a higher degree qualification

10. Source of funding to support study