

Guidelines for preparing a PhD application (Proposal development)

Management Studies, University of Aberdeen

These guidelines are designed to help you to develop a competent proposal to include as part of your application to study for a PhD in Management and related disciplines at the University of Aberdeen. The guidelines are not designed to tell you exactly how to write the proposal, but to indicate what potential supervisors assessing a PhD proposal would expect from someone applying to study for a PhD. This PhD application proposal is not the polished final proposal that will be expected after a year of study. In thinking about what should be included in a PhD proposal, it is important to start with what a PhD proposal is not. A PhD proposal is not:

1. a report of work done in the past;
2. a proposal to carry out consulting for one particular company;
3. a detailed project plan;
4. set in stone. If you are accepted to study for a PhD you can expect that your proposal will change substantially as your knowledge of research methodology and of your chosen field develops.

What we would expect to see in a PhD proposal:

1. A topic that is consistent with the research interests of members of staff within the Management Studies group at the University of Aberdeen. Research interests for each member of staff can be found on their individual web pages at <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/business/> (follow the link for 'Academic Staff');
2. A clear structure that shows an awareness of the conventions of academic writing in a UK context (see below for guidance on structure);
3. An indication that you are aware of what a PhD is about. Thus, we would expect that the proposal would identify a contribution to new knowledge and result in the development of new theoretical understanding within the field of management. It should not simply be the application of existing knowledge within a new context without any theory development. This contribution should be recognisable within the academic context of a globally recognised UK university, and should be capable of leading to publication in recognized English language business journals;
4. A review of the literature in the area in which you are interested in studying. This review should synthesise (not summarise) key articles in order to develop a coherent rationale for your proposed research topic. ;

The proposal must be an original piece of work, with sources clearly indicated using an accepted standard for referencing. We suggest you use the Harvard referencing system, which is straightforward, easy to use, and a recognised standard within the Management field. There are a number of guides on the web which show you how to reference using the Harvard system (see for example <http://www.shef.ac.uk/library/libdocs/hsl-dvc1.pdf>). It is important that in using other people's work you clearly acknowledge the source and do not plagiarise (ie copy verbatim without

clear indication that you are making a direct quotation from a source: simple copying is normally regarded as plagiarism in the UK, even if the source is cited, and is not acceptable).

Structure of the proposal

One potential structure, though by no means the only structure is:

Introduction

The proposal should start with a brief introduction to the topic of the proposed research, and an explanation of why this topic is of interest to academic researchers in the management field.

Literature review

The literature review should be a synthesis of the literature (rather than a series of simple summaries of individual articles) that develops the argument as to why the topic is of interest and importance, and how the proposed PhD would make a contribution to management knowledge. Either the literature review or the introduction should conclude with the over-arching aim of the research and/or the main research question. This aim/question should link clearly to the literature review. You may also include specific research objectives.

Methodology

A brief summary of the methods that you propose to use, including, if possible, an indication of how you will access the necessary data (e.g. target companies for case studies, indication of sample for questionnaire data gathering, modelling approach for a purely analytical study), and why the methodology chosen is appropriate to the research topic/question.

Project plan/Timetable

A brief project plan – not too detailed but showing an ability to plan work in order to finish in the three/four year timescale (depending on funding source). The plan/timetable should include key milestones and a timeline for their completion.

While following these guidelines will not guarantee that you will be accepted to study for a PhD, the proposal forms an important part of your application package, and having a competent proposal will help those who assess your proposal to make the final decision on your acceptance or not to the PhD programme.