

A photograph of a man and a woman sitting at a desk in a lecture hall, looking towards the front. The man is in the foreground, wearing a white shirt, and the woman is behind him.

## How to write your best Postgraduate Research proposal

University of Dundee



# Introduction

The Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2018 put us top in the UK and No 7 globally in their list of most effective publishers, so you know that Dundee is a university with fantastic researchers who have worldwide impact.

Your research degree can be one of the most valuable projects you'll undertake in your life. It gives you the opportunity to focus on your interests, improve your transferable skills and meet people with similar interests who can become lifelong friends. In completing it you can make an important contribution to your field of study.

We're here to help you make your research proposal the best it can possibly be. We'll take a look at why your research proposal is important, what it should include and give you some advice and guidance on what we look for when selecting our research students.



# Why?

Put simply, we're looking for excellent research proposals. Remember, a good proposal should be clear, concise and make the reader excited about the possibilities.

It's your chance to tell us about yourself, the aims of your PhD study and you should also outline how you plan to conduct your research. We're looking for researchers who clearly show strong engagement with their chosen subject and who have explored published academic research in their field. In the most recent Research Excellence Framework (2014), 76% of our research was rated as 'internationally renowned' or 'world-leading', so you need to be able to demonstrate that your ideas are engaging and have the possibility of providing real-world changes or solutions as well as contributing extensively to the theory and understanding of your chosen topic.

You can also collaborate on a pre-defined topic or work with your supervisor to create something exciting and unique. This is likely to be the case in the STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), as well as in Medicine. Our advice remains widely the same here, but remember, you are demonstrating to your supervisor that you understand their subject, and outlining why you'd be the best candidate for the position.

If you can show that you're able to demonstrate and communicate your analytical skills clearly, then you've made a great start.



# Making your content exciting

You should be able to explain your research in 2,500 words maximum. If you read over your proposal and are worried it's too long, then it probably is. The structure of your proposal is really important and you should consider each element.

Your title will be the first thing your potential supervisor will read. Think of it like an email subject line. Is it interesting enough to make your audience want to open your email?

Once you've got an eye-catching title, you can move on to your abstract. Here you should summarise your research in a couple of sentences. This is your chance to show us that you're passionate about the project and to outline the main issue or question that you hope to study or the reasons why you'd like to assist your supervisor on their project.

After you've written an abstract that you're confident outlines your ideas clearly, you can then go in to some more detail. You can talk about the main questions that will provide the focus of your research. Try and make sure that your questions are clear and avoid any vague or wide-ranging questions. If you're not sure how you plan to address each question, then think about whether or not they should be included in your proposal.



**We also want to hear a little bit about any current knowledge or studies that might tie-in with or contradict yours. What is the current world-view of your proposed area of study? Here you can talk about how you plan to use any current studies within your research and where your resources will come from. It's really important that you can clearly outline whether you'll be conducting interviews, field-work or collecting data and how you plan to analyse and come to conclusions.**

Of course, any good research project should be unique and have the potential to expand and increase existing knowledge. Think of it like you're interviewing for a job. Be proud of what you intend to achieve, sell yourself and tell us in a realistic manner the importance of the research you want to conduct.

There should be some literature that relates to your research and this may give us a clearer idea of your areas of interest. Therefore, remember to include a bibliography that details your points of reference.

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# Style guide

Every university will have a house style, so it's always a good idea to take a look at their current content. Each subject could want something slightly different from you. Some may ask you to include charts and graphs, others may be looking for short, sharp sentences. Think hard about how you structure your content.

Always read, re-read and read again. Have a friend or family member read over your content. Your attention to detail really gives us a clear indication that you have taken the time to think over your ideas and your proposal.

Your audience should read your proposal and leave with their mind full of possibilities. Remember that your potential supervisor will be passionate about the subject and will have a great deal of background knowledge. However, make sure everything you write is clear. It's always a good idea to have someone with no knowledge of the project read your proposal. If they can understand it, and outline your research back to you, then you know you're on the right track.

If you're asked to provide an academic CV, make sure you format it correctly. Detail your experiences, research you've undertaken in the past, any funding you've been awarded and any teaching/research interests that you already have. Try to be as concise as possible, but you can go in to more detail than you would have in a work/job CV. If you're planning to work with a supervisor on a pre-defined topic, include any work that shows you have the necessary skills to assist them.



# Remember

- Let us know how you will work with the world beyond the University and your wider audience. Impact is important to us.
- Take note of other important studies. These are a positive not a negative. It shows you've done your research.
- Keep your focus and make sure your work is contextualised and clear.
- Persuade us. We want to be excited and engaged by your project.
- Be thorough. This applies to your research, your proposal and your arguments.
- Make sure that whenever you reference or acknowledge contributors, you've done so correctly.
- Write only what you need to. Just enough that the audience wants to read more.
- Proofread then proofread again.
- Your project will evolve over time. New data could lead to new areas of research, so keep an open mind, be flexible and take the opportunities that come your way.



# We know how important funding is

When deciding where to do your research degree, you'll have looked at the academic reputation of the University, the suitability of the staff and, of course, the availability of funding.

Take a look at external funding bodies including charities, governmental agencies and employers but also make sure you look at University scholarships and other internal sources. If you're currently developing your idea for your research project, it's always helpful to contact a few potential supervisors and have a chat with them. They may provide some funding advice or could be advertising a suitable project with funding attached.

 [uod.ac.uk/funding](https://uod.ac.uk/funding)



# Ultimately, this is your project

Be an individual and take the lead. Take plenty of time to sell yourself, your project and your vision. The reader should leave with a great first impression of you and a clear understanding of the work you plan to undertake. Make sure you're realistic in your goals and remember that you can be flexible in your aims.

When contacting a supervisor to work on their project alongside them, don't be afraid to sell yourself. Your supervisor will be looking for people who are confident, engaging and have a clear and thorough understanding of their subject matter.

Most of all, this is your chance to show how passionate you are about your subject. Show us that you're enthusiastic, positive and dedicated.

Apply online

 [dundee.ac.uk/postgraduate](https://dundee.ac.uk/postgraduate)

 [contactus@dundee.ac.uk](mailto:contactus@dundee.ac.uk)

We'd love to hear from you.







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