School of Education - Writing a doctoral proposal

To help you with your application, this document aims to give some guidance on how a typical research proposal might look.

Your **aim** is to showcase your ability to carry out postgraduate research and to develop an original proposal. Of course, your actual 'original' contribution to knowledge will change over time, in response to reading, the courses you take or changes in preference/supervision. Here, the challenge is to demonstrate your potential to think at an appropriate level and demonstrate a realistic appreciation of the challenge posed by a doctorate.

Doctoral proposals should be approximately 1,000 words in length.

Your **title** should be short at this stage, indicative of what is to come. Good titles signal clearly what you plan the research to be about and have something sparky or eye-catching about them, backed up with substance.

Next, give a brief **introduction** to the document and your proposed study.

The **rationale for the research project** often includes an outline of the question/debate/phenomenon of interest, and the context(s) and situation in which you think the research will take place.

Possible details to include:

- an explanation of why the topic is of interest to you;
- an outline of the reasons why the topic should be of interest to research and/ or practice (the 'so what?' question)
- references to some literature and/or policy references from the field to show how your proposal might sit alongside existing work that has been done.

Next, consider the **key issues** you plan to investigate at this early stage and **initial research questions** that link clearly in the mind of the reader.

Again, aspects you might cover include:

- The research problem or issues you intend to investigate;
- A discussion of some key literature and theoretical perspectives that might inform the issues (indicative at the application stage);
- As precisely as you can, what is the overarching question you are trying to answer? Support with 2/3 more specific research questions;

A research proposal should make a positive and persuasive first impression, demonstrating your potential to become a good researcher. You need to demonstrate that you can think critically and analytically as well as communicate your ideas clearly. If you have a key theoretical position in mind, please outline this in your application, together with some understanding of any critiques that have been raised.

That's the what, next to the how: **methodology and research design.** How might you go about answering the research questions you have provisionally identified? What methodology/methods are you proposing?

NB, at Bristol we supervise an incredibly wide range of PhDs, including theoretical, empirical, historical, comparative, or policy-focused work as well as quantitative studies including secondary data analysis. Indicate why you think the **overall approach** you have chosen is the best one possible for your proposed study. Give some indication of your **methods**, if the proposed study is empirical, for example surveys, statistics, interviews, observations, diaries.

Include some discussion of the **ethical** issues raised in your project and how you would (in outline) address these.

Regarding the **expected outcomes and impact of the study** (again, indicative only at this stage), how do you think your research might add to existing knowledge; what might it enable organisations or interested parties to do differently? Increasingly in academia (particularly so for funded studentships) Doctoral researchers are being asked to consider how their research might contribute to both academic impact and/or economic and

societal impact. This is well explained on the [ESRC website](#) if you would like to find out more.

It is important to be realistic about the **timetable** by which you intend to conduct and complete your study. What is your initial estimation of how long it will take you? Any milestones on the way, for example when will each of the key stages start and finish (refining proposal; literature review; developing research methods; fieldwork; analysis; writing the draft; final submission). There are likely to overlaps between the stages.

Do make sure that you cite what you see as the key readings in the field and **reference** them consistently according to a standard system used in Education as a research field. This does not have to be comprehensive but should illustrate the full range of sources you might use.

Good luck and looking forward to receiving your application!