Writing the PhD proposal

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WHAT IS A PROPOSAL?

1. What am I asking?
2. What has already been written?
3. What am I adding to that?
4. How am I going to do that?
5. Why is that important/useful?
6. Why should any potential supervisor be interested?

- A PhD proposal is a an outline of your proposed project that is designed to define a clear question and outline an approach to answering it
- Highlight its originality and significance
- Explain how it adds to, develops or challenges existing literature
- Persuade potential supervisors that the research is worth doing

“A persuasive document”
## Scope

1. 1st problem with most PhD proposals is over-proposing
2. Make sure you are not planning to do something outside your pocket
3. Make sure that there will be adequate time to complete all stages – **everything takes longer than you think!**
4. Make sure you have the necessary expertise or have planned in training to your time and found the source of training – see above...

- Think about the scope of what you propose
- 3 years full-time, 5/6 years part-time
- This is not a taught programme but independent research
- “Scope”
  - Money
  - Time
  - Expertise
WHO WILL BE MY SUPERVISOR?

How to begin the relationship well

1. Initial contact, short brief introduction of your research interest
2. Send draft proposal
3. This is not a taught course so don’t expect your supervisor to speak to you every week
4. Before any meeting or interaction, make sure you have something substantive to discuss
5. Procedural issues are handled by Franz

• Establishing a relationship key to the development of the research proposal
• Don’t be afraid to suggest/approach a supervisor
• Identify a potential supervisor from the WBS group of scholars before embarking on writing
• Possibly have some correspondence with them to gauge their interest
• If this is a problem refer to Franz/Shona
Writing the proposal

- Write a good title
- Not too vague or broad
- ...but not too specific
- Revise as your thinking and writing develop
- Remember to *persuade*
  - Does it sound interesting?
  - Does it adequately describe the proposed research?
  - Key words
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OVERVIEW

• In short...
• research questions (usually 1-3)
• the major approaches you will take and why
• significance of the research to the existing literature
• Real world context
• Potential impact on business practice/policy
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LITERATURE REVIEW AND POSITIONING

• Dual purpose
• To show the potential supervisor that you have read around the subject and understand the key literature, debates and issues relevant to your questions
• To persuade the potential supervisor that you have identified a gap in the above that your research can address.
• Up-to-date journal articles & seminal contributions
• Evidence of understanding of journal importance and ranking. Not all papers are alike
The research gap

• Denotes the contribution your research proposes to make to existing knowledge
• Can be incremental
• Better not to be “paradigm busting”
• Middle ground is best
• Does it answer the “so what?” question
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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

• You must have a section on theory. In what academic theories are your questions grounded? Are there competing theories?
• This section will most likely need seminal contributions from the literature. It should showcase your ability to understand abstract concepts and apply them to real world research questions.
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DESIGN AND METHOD

• Introduce with a brief overview of your intended approach and (most importantly) justify your approach in relation to the subject and the questions you are asking – why is this the best approach to use?

• Give specific methods you propose to use and justify these. Show evidence of method expertise
  – Quantitative (specifics)
  – Qualitative (specifics)
  – Mixed (specifics)

• Auxiliary issues are part of the research design – don’t neglect these!
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Design and method
- Auxiliary information

- Risk management section – what is most likely to go wrong and how might you mitigate against this
- Time table/Gannt chart – is it realistic and do you have a clear understanding of a PhD lifecycle?
- Access issues – how likely is it that you will be able to find the people/things you want to do research on and how likely is it that they will agree – what’s your contingency plan?
- Ethics. Are there any ethical issues? Are you creating new data? Are there security implications? Are you doing field work outside the UK? Does your proposal need ethic approval from the University?
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• Make sure your references are correct
• Look through your references after you have finished, do you have sufficient journal articles?
• Are they well formatted?
• Don’t rely too much on softer literature (books etc), this is a back up
Points to remember

• The aim is to persuade the reader that this research **needs** to be done
• Make it interesting!
• Show your passion – a Phd takes a long time
• Think about your research broadly in a real world as well as academic context
• Remember that it should evolve as your PhD progresses, you are not “locked in” - BUT it shouldn’t change too dramatically