



Writing a PhD proposal  
for the  
Research Degrees Committee

### Introduction

In considering the applications from students who wish to register for research towards a higher degree in the University of Manchester, your previous academic history, your academic skills and the recommendations of your referees are very important in helping the Research Degrees Committee (RDC) reach its decision.

The University will consider your proposal as a crucial piece of evidence in support of your application for admission to a research programme. Remember the University of Manchester has a world-class reputation that it seeks to enhance, so it considers carefully the quality of the research students it admits.

Here are some hints to help you write a good proposal.

#### **1 Before you begin writing the proposal.**

Have an initial discussion with Cliff College's Academic Director or a provisional supervisor assigned to you by the Academic Director. As part of that discussion, you will already have identified an area of study but you will almost certainly need to narrow the scope of your study.

- For example, you may have indicated that your interest is in John Wesley, Atonement theology or UK church planting. All of these are interesting but very broad areas for study; you will need to narrow your topic and specify it with more precision, for instance John Wesley's theology of disability, the espoused atonement theology of 14-18 year olds, Methodist church planting between 1990 – 2010.
- Do some preliminary reading and internet searches around the topic so that you can narrow the topic to an aspect of the area deserving extensive study.
- Enter into dialogue with the academic director or assigned provisional supervisor who will guide you in this process. They will be interested in what you are reading and may be able to offer some further suggestions or even just say 'keep on, you're doing well!'

#### **2 Writing the proposal**

Although proposals will have different content depending upon the subject area of your research, they will have a similar structure. The proposal can be up to 2000 words in overall length, including

bibliography and footnotes. Stick to these word limits – you are going to need to be strict with yourself on word limits in due course, and you might just as well begin to do so now. It needs to include the elements listed below. Each of these elements should be given a heading in the proposal to aid readers on the various committees who will need to consider your proposal. An indication of the suggested length of each is given below but this is merely a rough guide.

- Time commitment
- Proposed title
- Research Question(s)
- Rationale (including explanation of the title and questions)
- Problems and methodology
- Ethics
- Suggested contribution to knowledge
- Indicative bibliography

### 3 Comments on the elements

Time commitment [circa 100 words]

Indicate how you will manage to complete the PhD alongside your normal responsibilities. The College's experience is that the only students who struggle with the PhD are those who do not devote sufficient time to their studies. You should anticipate spending a **minimum of 12 hours per week for 52 weeks** of the year on your studies.

Proposed title [20 words or fewer]

The title should reflect the focus of your research. Almost certainly, this will be adjusted during your research, but it is one of the ways that the University tracks your registration.

Research question [100 words or fewer]

All of you will have had experience of writing one or more research questions for an essay or a dissertation. The same principles apply here. Formulate one or more questions (not more than 3) that is/are clear, focused and specific. The question(s) should be an issue to be addressed, problem to be solved or hypothesis to be tested. In constructing the questions, remember that they need to be answerable within the three years full-time (six year part time) devoted to the British PhD. This research question will also be tied to your suggested contribution to research or scholarship. Of course, the questions may well be nuanced in the course of your research, but if they are clear from the outset, they will help you avoid straying into interesting, but irrelevant (for the thesis) by-paths.

Rationale [circa 700 words]

This gives the whole **academic** reason why you are writing this thesis. It offers an explanation of the title, topic and questions. Here you will want to elaborate on the main research questions that surround your title and give an indication of why these questions would lead to fruitful enquiry and make a suitable contribution to study.

As part of this, you will need to show how your proposed topic of research relates to current scholarship; and how it may contribute to, or advance, work in the field. You will need to cite approximately 5 to 10 academic works that are relevant to your topic. No one expects mastery at this stage – you have hardly even begun! But we do need to know that you are not trying to begin a PhD on a subject where you are a novice. We need to see that you have some idea of what some of the

major resources might be. Your provisional supervisor will certainly guide you in the right direction. During the course of your first year of research, you will gain command of the literature in your area – but that's not for now. Remember, this is not a statement on the research you have personally completed – this is on the scholarly work that is being done on this area within your discipline field. But this will require some preliminary work.

This is likely to be the longest section in your proposal.

Clarity of expression is important here. The RDC at the College and the University will be looking for clear evidence that you are capable of research at PhD level. So do think through the rationale. Once again, give close attention to the comments your provisional supervisor will make.

Methodology [circa 500 words]

This is a crucial part of the proposal because here you should identify any problems you might encounter and the method or standpoint from which you are investigating these questions. Essentially, then, you have set out the questions in the previous sections (Research Question and Rationale) and here you are going to outline the tools you will use to answer these questions.

If you are taking an interdisciplinary approach in **missiology or practical theology** you will be aware that you are engaging in critical dialogue. As you draw conclusions of a theological nature from reflection on a particular practice (reflective practice), you enter into dialogue with other branches of theology. Be mindful that the 'text' on which reflective practice and formulation is done, may be a cultural experience or social trend, or humanity itself. Other disciplines are called upon to help in understanding the meaning and purpose of conclusions you are formulating. These conclusions will raise questions that can then be addressed back to these disciplines and to the practitioners. In other words you are carrying out constructive practical theology in a contemporary setting which attempts to reorientate the dimension or task of these disciplines in a very specific way.

If you are applying for the PhD Missiology programme, you will be required to undertake some form of empirical study, and so you will need to become familiar with at least one empirical research method (eg. interviews, surveys, case studies). Please give an indication of how you think you might undertake your field research: qualitatively, quantitatively, mixed-methods. In addressing this, please also indicate the particular group or context that your research will address, indicating how your research arises in relation to that group or context.

If you are proposing a methodology that bridges several disciplines, the task will be to show how you will achieve appropriate depth in your research. In most cases, it is probably advisable to set out your primary research method, showing the contributions from other disciplines.

Other methodological considerations will be subject-specific. For example, in **biblical studies** you might be planning a close reading of a particular text within its narrative context and therefore using a narrative critical approach. Or you might be intending to conduct an intertextual investigation about how a particular NT writer is using the OT literature and therefore giving particular attention to intertextual methodologies. Or you might be trying to set a particular problem of Jesus of Nazareth in the context of Second Temple Judaism or an aspect of Pauline practice in the light of the Graeco-Roman empire and therefore be interested in social history.

In **doctrinal theology or church history**, once you have selected your topic, it is important to become familiar with the primary sources and identify primary sources for research. You will not only indicate the content of the primary sources but also indicate any expected problems of interpretation. For example, if you are planning to work on John Wesley's thought or some aspect of historical

research you should identify Wesley's own writings that are important and relevant eighteenth century writings. If you plan to work on the Early Church Fathers then identify the primary sources that will be investigated for the research. This will lead to secondary sources and the interpretations of the secondary sources. Again you will give evidence of any expected problems in the various interpretations of the secondary sources. At this point you are prepared for a more detailed description of the next stage in the writing of the proposal.

Throughout all of this, you need to demonstrate that your study will be academically sound rather than merely anecdotally based or impressionistic, and as such you need to indicate any problems that you think you might encounter during the course of your study. You do not need to address these fully at this stage but you will need to demonstrate you are aware of them. These might not be the only hurdles you encounter. Most of them, of course, are probably unknown to you at the moment, but reflect on what you think the obstacles might be.

#### Ethics

Here you need to demonstrate some awareness of the potential ethical ramifications of your research. Generally, ethics only become an issue when you are carrying out research on the human subject, and much more of an issue when carrying out research directly with minors. Qualitative research involving interviews, focus groups and the like will always generate issues to do with informed consent and the 'positionality' of the researcher. At this stage, we are not asking you to fill in an ethical approval form – that comes later – but just to show that you are aware of the potential issues to do with participants being in any way coerced into taking part or feeling like they have to tell you what they think you want to hear. For example, if you are their pastor you will need to choose a research method that places a healthy distance between you and the participants, e.g. an anonymous survey.

#### Suggested contribution to knowledge [200 words or fewer]

This is a very preliminary indication of what you might hope your work will contribute to the stream of scholarship as you know it now. It will be related in some way to your research question. Your provisional supervisor will be a great help in framing this section. He or she will be able to tell you where you might find a niche to add to the body of knowledge.

#### Indicative bibliography [does not count towards word count]

A preliminary bibliography providing a sample of around 20 key books and other sources that you consider essential to, and representative of, your proposed field and topic of research

#### **4 PhD Miss additional comment**

If you are applying for the PhD Miss programme, then additionally, please provide 500 words on your current or recent ministry or missional situation/ context which will become the basis for your research. This must include why you are in a strong position to do this particular topic of research at this particular time. Please note, this does not have to relate to paid ministry; it can be in respect of voluntary work, but your research must relate to some practical experience in which you are either recently or currently engaged.

#### **4 The Process**

Completing this process may seem daunting. That is why we have assigned you a provisional supervisor to guide you through the process. Here are a few tips that will help you navigate the process.

- Pay attention to the advice of the provisional supervisor. If you are asked to correct something or a change in focus is suggested, do take account of the advice.
- Don't prolong the process. Do it as quickly as you can without compromising the quality. You should aim to produce a draft proposal within four weeks.
- If you have not heard from your provisional supervisor within a week of sending something, don't be hesitant to ask again. Our supervisors are busy people, and just occasionally, they have the notable professorial disease of forgetting something!
- Once your provisional supervisor is satisfied, the proposal will be taken to the RDC. The provisional supervisor will speak to it on your behalf.
- Your proposal will get very detailed scrutiny from the RDC. Our aim is to have proposals laid before the RDC that should be accepted. However, RDC could well ask you for some changes. If you have done your work well to this point, they will likely be minor.
- If the changes are minor, the RDC may empower the Chair to act between meetings so that your proposal is not delayed unnecessarily.
- If the changes are major, the proposal may be delayed to the next meeting. Don't be discouraged by this – the process is intended to help you get off to a good start.
- Once the RDC has approved the proposal, it will be sent to the University. Our policy is not to submit proposals that we do not think will be passed at the University. The School of Arts, Languages and Cultures at The University of Manchester does have the final say. This final say takes the form of a University-based RDC meeting called the RTRDC, where partner colleges (Cliff College, the Nazarene Theological College and Luther King House) and University staff from the Religions and Theology (RT) department make decisions about applicants to either accept, refer or reject them.