

Appendix 4: Guidelines for Preparing a Research Proposal for Graduate Studies in the School of Law

Introduction

To apply for admission to either the MPhil or PhD programmes offered by the School of Law (SLW), each applicant is required to prepare and submit a research proposal. A research proposal can best be described as a ‘roadmap’ of the intended project. It must set out the various components of the project in enough detail to enable the evaluators to make an informed decision about the viability of the project. The proposal should guide the evaluators through the underlying assumptions, problems, questions, hypotheses, and relevant literature. In a sense, the research proposal is a kind of distillation of the envisaged thesis, but obviously without all the nuances, analyses, arguments, and conclusions that would constitute the final work. The content may, and often does, change and evolve over the course of several years of MPhil/PhD research, but it is vital that the School and potential supervisor are able to decide on the viability of the applicant’s proposed project before admitting him/her.

Applicants are advised to consult a faculty member at the School of Law with relevant expertise and/or research interests for comments on their draft proposal and to gauge that faculty member’s availability and willingness to supervise the project. The School cannot accept applicants unless there is adequate supervision available. Applicants who have already published their academic work (for instance, as book chapters or journal articles) are also encouraged to submit a representative publication together with their application materials.

Contents of the Research Proposal

When making decisions about your research topic and proposal design, it is useful to keep in mind that, ultimately, an MPhil thesis should present the results of research investigation, give evidence of a sound understanding of the area of study, its context and applicability, and make a contribution to knowledge. A PhD thesis, in addition to the above, should make a substantial original contribution to knowledge in the subject area concerned. For a PhD thesis (approx. 100,000 words), your study must advance legal scholarship in your subject area. And for an MPhil thesis (approx. 45,000 words), your contribution to the field of knowledge must be significant enough to demonstrate your research competency and command of the subject area. Whether you are pursuing a PhD or MPhil, a mere reproduction of existing knowledge will not be enough. Applicants must therefore take care to choose a research question(s) that will allow them to meet these criteria: the research topic should be relevant and warranting of further research, but also narrow enough in scope to ensure the feasibility of the proposed study.

A research proposal usually includes the following key components, and may be up to 25 pages in length:

(a) Title

A working title for the proposed project (e.g. ‘A critical analysis of directors’ fiduciary duties in comparative perspective’).

(b) *Abstract*

A short, maximum 350-word summary of your research proposal.

(c) *Background / Literature Review / Theoretical Foundation*

Include a brief but sufficiently detailed and comprehensive introduction outlining the general area of study and demonstrating your knowledge and competency in conversing about your subject area. This part of the research proposal will provide an overview of the existing literature and/or theory and current state of knowledge, as well as recent debates, controversies, and/or new developments in the selected field of study. In addition, this part of the proposal will highlight specific shortcomings or problem areas in the subject area in order to contextualise the research question(s) and objectives of the proposed research project. It is vital that the proposal convinces the evaluator that you are aware of the current debates in the subject area, and that you have read widely and inquisitively to gain the necessary insight into the subject matter at hand. A good background section and solid literature review presupposes thorough preparation, reading, and pre-study. This will also enable you to position the research proposal within schools of thought, methodological approaches, and a general theoretical context. The preliminary title may also inform this aspect of the proposal, for instance ‘critical analysis’, ‘comparative study’, ‘historical analysis’ etc.

(d) *Research Question(s)*

After having outlined your subject area, articulate the primary (and secondary) research question(s) that will guide your research. A good research question (or hypothesis) is clear, concise, and concrete. It will be a golden thread running throughout the thesis, leading to the conclusion(s) and final proposal(s)/answer(s).

(e) *Rationale and Objectives*

Explain why this research project is a worthy undertaking and important for the particular field of study. Also provide a clear statement of the objectives of the research. In other words, explain what you intend to achieve and the contribution that your research will make to our existing knowledge. Since postgraduate research should not be a mere summary of existing literature, but should also add value, it is important to justify clearly the intended research project. The rationale does not have to be the invention of a totally new theory. For example, you might propose to test an existing theory about the law on new data, such as a different jurisdiction, and thereby refine this theory. Your contribution can take many different forms, as long as it is clear that the research will add some value to the field of law.

(f) *Research Methodology*

A particularly important part of a research proposal relates to the research methods that you intend to use in answering the research question(s). You must explain and justify these research methods in sufficient detail to demonstrate that they are appropriate for the purpose

of the research project. In other words, your methods must be appropriate for answering your research question(s) and achieving the research objectives that you have identified. For instance, a historical or comparative study will require certain comparative or historical methods, such as field research or archival research. Note, however, that the most appropriate research methods for your project may differ from those that other scholars have used to answer similar research questions. For instance, where others have used only doctrinal methods, you might find that penetrating a doctrinal research question requires empirical methods. In the natural and social sciences, it is customary to elaborate one's methodology with some rigour, a practice legal studies often neglects. While it is unnecessary to write extensively about your methodology in a legal studies research proposal, you should explain in clear terms how you will tackle the research problem and why you chose the particular approach or approaches. Some of the most common methodologies used in legal studies are doctrinal, comparative, historical, critical and empirical (qualitative and/or quantitative).

(g) *Chapter Outline and Timeline*

Your proposal should include a preliminary chapter outline and timeline for the proposed research project. The chapter outline sketches the structure of your thesis by providing a list of chapter headings with a short explanation of the content of each chapter. The chapter outline should reflect your anticipated development of the thesis, building up to the conclusion.

The timeline provides a preliminary indication of your intended progress. Keep in mind the prescribed study periods for MPhil and PhD degree programmes: An MPhil degree normally takes 2 years to complete for full-time students and 4 years for part-time students. PhD students usually take 4 years as full-time students and 8 years as part-time students to complete the PhD programme.

(h) *Bibliography*

As a first step, list all the works cited in your proposal. Additionally, the bibliography will normally include works you have read that are related to your subject area, as well as works you have identified as potential sources for your project. This is because, in addition to providing information about cited sources, the bibliography of a research proposal should indicate whether the applicant is aware of the most important and most recent primary and secondary sources dealing with the subject area. Do not view the bibliography as exhaustive, however, since your research will most likely lead to the discovery of additional sources.

A research proposal is an essential starting point for any research project, but it is also important to remember that the research process is dynamic. It is likely that you will adjust and further refine the proposed project during the course of the research process. Nonetheless, the better the research proposal, the easier the research and writing process will be.

Please note: Applicants must write and submit their own work. Please ensure that you read through and understand the City University of Hong Kong's Rules of Academic Honesty, available at

http://www.cityu.edu.hk/provost/academic_honesty/rules_on_academic_honesty.htm.