

Writing a Research Proposal to Support your Application for the PhD in Business Management

A PhD is a research project that is completed independently, with the support of two supervisors (faculty members of BUiD), resulting in a written thesis of approximately 65,000 – 80,000 words. The reasons for doing a PhD thesis are diverse, but the final thesis has to make an original contribution to knowledge that has significant implications for theory and practice. A PhD journey is not one without challenges and involves learning many new ideas and skills. The time to complete a PhD varies but typically is expected to take 3 or more years full-time and 4 or more years part-time. The process is intellectually challenging, physically and emotionally demanding, but also is very rewarding. The first step in your PhD journey is writing a research proposal where you reflect on and write about your research aims, motivation, and interests.

A research proposal is a preliminary plan of your proposed PhD research. It is a central document in your application for the PhD programme, and should be written carefully. In one sense, it is your opportunity to convince others about what it is that makes your research interesting and persuade them to offer you a place on the PhD programme. The research proposal is designed to demonstrate your interest in the subject area and make a persuasive argument about why your chosen topic is worth studying and how the research might be conducted. A research proposal is only an initial idea for your PhD research and it is accepted that if you join the programme, the topic and focus may change substantially during the course of your studies.

Your research proposal must be submitted along with your application. You should expect that the content of your proposal will be the principal topic of conversation should you be invited for an interview.

Research proposals vary in length, but should cover the following content requirements in detail. The recommended length for the proposal is 1,300 – 1,500 words.

Contents of the research proposal

Title page – The title of the research should be interesting and include important key words relevant for the topic.

Abstract – A short summary of the project, its aims and significance.

Introduction – The introduction should clearly address the phenomenon under study, its background and importance. In this section you can indicate the purpose of the research and why it is needed.

Research questions and objectives – As a result of your interest and knowledge of the topic, initial literature review and consideration of relevant theories, you should identify the gap in the literature in your proposed research area. Please provide 1-2 initial research questions addressing the gap in knowledge that you aim to address in your proposed PhD project. Once the research problem and questions have been identified, you will be able to specify the main aim and 3-6 objectives for your project. These statements should indicate what it is that you plan to accomplish by undertaking this research.

Short literature review – Your literature review should address the research phenomenon through consulting available academic literature on the topic (e.g. books and academic journal articles). Remember to explicitly identify a gap in the literature that you aim to address in your PhD research. Your review of the literature should include relevant citations to key literature and show your awareness of the topic and the field of study from an academic perspective. Your literature review should indicate which business/management theory you will be using in your research. An effective literature review presents an up-to-date and innovative point of view on the topic. It also incorporates a critical analysis and synthesis of key concepts and debates.

Methodology – This section should address how you are going to design your research and explain what methods you aim to use to collect, analyse and interpret primary and secondary data. For example, are you going to use a predominantly qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods approach to the research. If it is primarily a qualitative research design what propositions will you study and what methods will you use (e.g. interviews, focus groups, field observation, etc)? If it is chiefly a quantitative study what model, hypotheses and methods will you use (e.g. a survey questionnaire or econometric modelling)? Please state the size of your sample and explain how you will collect your data.

Significance and contribution of the research – This section should state the potential impact of your research for academics, practitioners and society. Your research must make an original contribution to (theoretical) knowledge.

References – You should provide a list of references, in a consistent recognized format (see e.g. <http://www.citethisforme.com/guides> for common referencing styles). References should include academic journal articles from your proposed area of study. If you do not have access to an academic library, you can obtain articles using Google Scholar and other search engines.