

Writing a Research Proposal for Doctoral Applications

As part of your application to any of the doctoral/masters by research programmes at DCU Business School, you are required to complete a research proposal. In this proposal, you will describe the research you plan to undertake. As such, it is a vital part of your application process.

The research proposal involves a considerable amount of preparation. You will be expected to have refined your initial research ideas through critical analysis of some of the academic literature relevant to your topic. You will also be expected to have reflected on the nature of your proposed research and its impact. In this document, we present a set of guidelines to show you what is involved in the writing of a research proposal and to help you structure your research proposal effectively.

What should the research proposal consist of?

In essence, your research proposal should answer three questions:

- What do you want to investigate?
- Why do you want to investigate it?
- How are you going to investigate it?

Your aim is to demonstrate that you have begun the process of refining your ideas for a research topic and that you have the capability to research at the level of the programme. One of the ways to demonstrate this is to show how your research idea relates to published research. You need also to show that you have given some thought as to why your research ideas are worth researching.

The maximum words for the research proposal is **3000 words** (excluding references).

How should the research proposal be structured?

Below, we give a suggested structure for the research proposal. There are five main sections.

Section One: Background to the Proposed Research (500 words)

In this section, you should aim to give a clear, concise description of the research problem that you will address, including the precise research question(s) and objectives.

Section Two: Preliminary Literature Review (1,000 words)

In this section, you should give a brief summary of some of the academic literature that will inform your analysis of the issue or problem you present in section one. Try to answer the following questions. They are designed to make you think about the relationship between the existing academic literature and your own research idea.

- What are the main concepts introduced on this topic and how are they defined?
- What are the main questions that the topic attempts to address?
- What are the different theories that exist on the topic?
- What are gaps in understanding that you hope your proposed research will address?

You should avoid giving a history of the evolution of a concept or a body of knowledge. Instead, focus on the contemporary state of knowledge on your topic.

Section Three: Proposed Research Methodology (750 words)

In this section, you should outline the research methods you intend using to gather data for your research. It is important to ensure that the methods you choose give you the appropriate data to answer the research questions you pose in your introduction. For example, if you want to explore a process, as opposed to a structure or an outcome, i.e. how a certain situation was arrived at over time, qualitative analysis may be more appropriate than quantitative analysis. If you want to assess a general mood or attitude across a large group of individuals, quantitative analysis would be a suitable technique. Remember, however, that quantitative and qualitative research methods are not mutually exclusive and you may feel that a mixed methodology is appropriate. It is important to mention any obstacles you perceive as impacting upon your research plan.

Try to answer the following questions. They may help you to clarify your proposed methodological approach.

- Whose opinions, attitudes and beliefs do you want to assess (i.e. who will provide the raw data for your research)?
- What data sources might you use?
- Why will these data help you answer the research question(s) you've posed?
- Do you want to see how these individuals' attitudes have changed over time, what their attitudes are about a particular event or situation?

Section Four: Justification for Proposed Research (750 words)

In this section, you should note why you feel your research topic and proposed study is important. You should outline planned contributions to existing academic knowledge, existing theories, methodology, practice and policy.

Section Five: References

In this section, you should give an alphabetical list of all material you have cited in your proposal. For the most part, you should confine your reading to academic research published in academic journals. (This section is not included in the total word count for the research proposal).