



THE RESEARCH PROPOSAL

(Note, this is an extract from p 8ff of the fuller document entitled “The preliminary research and proposal phase”)

Introduction

All LLM and PhD candidates must submit a detailed research proposal, which will initially be scrutinised and approved by their supervisors. Supervisors may require candidates to redraft their proposals until the requisite detail and depth have been achieved. Candidates are then required to submit their research proposals for consideration by the Law Faculty Higher Degrees Committee, which will recommend acceptance or otherwise of the proposal to the relevant Faculty Board.

It is essential to note that sections 1 to 4 of the proposal (see below) may not be longer than twelve pages in length

Candidates who intend to conduct surveys as part of their research must familiarise themselves with the University’s Ethical Standards Policy and obtain the necessary clearance from the Law Faculty’s Ethical Standards Committee. See <http://www.ru.ac.za/research/research/ethics> for the policy and the application form. Details regarding the survey should be provided in the research proposal.

The four core purposes of a research proposal

Simply put, the exercise of doing a research proposal has four core purposes:

- The proposal gives your work an articulated sense of purpose.
- It enables the Higher Degrees Committee to assess the validity of your proposed research question.
- It enables the student, the supervisor and the Higher Degrees Committee to determine, (from a mini-exercise) whether you have demonstrated the potential and capability to manage the substantive and formal demands of a full thesis.
- It gives you the opportunity to develop a relationship with your supervisor/mentor, and for you to see if the supervisor allocated to you is the right fit for you.

In so far as the first two requirements are concerned, you should be aiming to do the following to be successful:

- demonstrate your familiarity with the most important research in the field;
- indicate the gap or niche in existing research that your research aims to fill, and how; and
- justify your research by demonstrating the importance/value of your research.

Please understand that the Higher Degrees Committee scrutinises proposals very, very rigorously and carefully, in terms of structure, content and form, so it is in your interests to pay careful attention to what is required. The first submission will also be subjected to pre-screening to assess its readiness for submission to the Committee at all.

Submission date

The due date for submission of proposals for consideration at the first Higher Degrees Committee meeting of the year is around 25 March of each year. Where a candidate does not submit his or her proposal timeously, the Higher Degrees Committee will require the candidate and supervisor to give reasons for the failure to meet the deadline and thereafter it may recommend to Faculty either that the deadline be extended or that the candidate's registration be terminated. Where the deadline is extended, or a student registers later in the year, the proposal must be submitted 4 weeks before the date of subsequent Higher Degrees Committee meetings. This is to allow time for the pre-screening process (and any need for amendments that may come from that). Meeting dates are contained in each year's *University Calendar*, which is accessible from the University's website home page.

Style

A research proposal should be typed in one-and-a-half spacing on A4 paper, in 12 point font.

Some general/preliminary notes on style:

Do:

- produce a professional looking proposal
- write in a way that is easy to read
- use clear headings and sub-headings
- be concise and precise
- use simple language wherever possible
- construct clear arguments
- check your spelling and grammar
- reference your work fully using an acceptable format. The style found in the annual *Law Faculty Handbook* is recommended.

Do not:

- use words when you are not absolutely certain of their meaning
- use difficult words to impress your reader
- use overly simplistic language
- repeat yourself
- digress.

Structure and content

All proposals should be presented with a front page that indicates:

1. Name of the candidate, student number, e-mail address, telephone number and other contact details.
2. The degree for which the proposal is being submitted.
3. The Faculty in which the candidate will be carrying out the research and the subject or specific field in which research is to be carried out. Where there are co-supervisors from two Faculties, the name of the other Department or Faculty involved must be stated.
4. The title of the thesis or the field of research.
5. The type of thesis (whether a full thesis or thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree).
6. Full-time or part-time.
7. The name(s) of the supervisor(s), if known.
8. Estimated date of completion.

The proposal that follows must be structured in the manner indicated below. (This is not only a Faculty but also a University-wide requirement.)

A reminder that Sections 1 to 4 may not be longer than 12 pages in length. This will be strictly enforced, and proposals which have sections 1 to 4 exceeding this length will be returned to candidates without any critical engagement.

Section 1: The **provisional title** of the research project, with a brief description of the **field of research**, which should be stated fairly broadly.

Thereafter, a description in one sentence, of a crisp **research question** which the study intends to explore (sometimes described as a **hypothesis**). This is an important aspect of the proposal: it is helpful for a candidate not only to propose a title, but also to be able to formulate a research question succinctly, so that the focus and precision of the candidate's overall idea for research can be assessed. It may be prefaced by a similarly short problem statement, if necessary.

This section is NOT an introduction, and long, rambling descriptive introductions will not be accepted.

- Section 2: Description and context of the research.** This section provides the general background regarding the research that will be undertaken and should make it clear why there is a problem/topic is worth addressing. It sketches the background to the problem and, where appropriate, should provide a brief theoretical framework within which the problem is to be addressed. This section demonstrates that you are familiar with the key literature in the field that traverses the problem, and should contain an integrated, critical assessment of the background to the legal problem you have identified. **The Key Question in this section is: WHY? (Why is there a legal problem worth investigating?)** Note that the goals of the research (what you intend to do in your thesis) should not appear in this section.
- Section 3: Goal(s) of the research.** This section should outline the subject/area/field to be critically investigated and, where appropriate, set out the specific question(s) to which the candidate hopes to find answers. It should indicate clearly what the research intends to achieve, and its scope. It is important that the goals correspond to the nature of the research task and to the envisaged time frames. The goals section should be brief, and you are welcome to identify your goals in a numbered list or in bullet points. The goals should not be too extensive, or it is likely that the reach of the thesis will become too extensive, unmanageable, or may suggest there is insufficient focus to the work. Generally, the goals should be limited to 4 to 5 at the most, and should be described crisply and concisely. **The Key Question in this section is: WHAT? (What am I intending to achieve with my research?)**
- Section 4: Methodology.** This section describes the manner in which the research will be undertaken. **The Key Question in this section is: HOW? (How are you intending to go about doing your research and compiling your thesis?)** There is a separate section below on legal research methodology for you to draw on.
- Section 5: Bibliography and references.** Important and relevant sources which support the proposed research, and which provide a background to the research should be cited. Such source material referred to in the proposal should be cited in an appropriate and consistent style. The same applies to the footnoting of the text in sections 1 to 4. The referencing style of the Faculty as set out in the annual *Law Faculty Handbook* is recommended.
- Section 6: Provisional table of contents, chapter lengths and time frames.** This section details a provisional table of contents for the thesis and is a useful route map to guide the research. It also indicates the extent to which you have researched and thought about the issues. You will not be bound by what you have written down, but it does provide some initial structure for your research. The proposed length of each chapter should be indicated as well as the time frame for its completion.