L-Università ta' Malta
Centre for Labour Studies

Guidelines for the Formulation and Submission of a Research Proposal

Master of Science in Work and Organisational Behaviour (by Research)

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Introduction

The aim of the research proposal is to identify a viable and relevant topic and a plan of approach using the research proposal template below. The candidate is required to demonstrate that a certain amount of reading and realistic planning has already been carried out. These should lead to feasible aims and objectives that should be obtained within the stipulated period of study.

Applicants must prove that they understand a particular research focus in their discipline, that is: related to work and organisational behaviour, including in the areas of industrial relations, organisational behaviour, occupational health, gender and work, work-life issues, equality and diversity in the workplace, and career development.

Applicants must demonstrate that they have done their preliminary research, and are able to critically assess the literature and identify how their study relates to and engages with prior work in the area. They should also show that they are able to analyse and set out their research questions logically and clearly, are able to arrive at well-reasoned and justified conclusions, and are then able to draw up proposals or recommendations for improvement where appropriate (MQF Level 7 – Malta Qualifications Framework 2010).

Special attention should be given to the 'Evaluation Checklist for Research Proposals' below. This will help the candidate evaluate their proposal using the same criteria as those used by the MSc by Research Committee.

The detailed research proposal should be around 3000 words (excluding references and appendices). The candidate should provide a table of contents, including subheadings (if any). Applicants are strongly recommended to start preparation and work on the proposal at least three months ahead of submission. **We strongly advise the candidate to discuss the proposal with a potential supervisor prior to submission, to increase the chance of the proposal being accepted.**

The below template offers a suggested order, serving as a guide for the candidate. This order is flexible; certain sections may be merged; and additional ones may also be added. The suggested headings serve as benchmarks to indicate to the evaluator:

• What the research problem is;

• How the candidate intends to carry out the research;

• What the outcomes could be; and

• The implications of the research for the field.

1. Title

The title should be concise and clear, succinctly identifying and describing the nature and scope of the project. Select appropriate key words or phrases.

2. Statement of research problem

The statement of the research problem should be conveyed in a sentence or a paragraph, and encapsulate exactly what the problem is.

3. Background to the research problem

Since the statement of the problem should be very brief, it is necessary to explain separately what the background to the problem is. Clarify the area of concern, or clarify the needs that justify the research (this could be a subheading). Why is it a significant topic? What contribution is your work expected to make? Any information that helps the evaluator to understand the problem may be included. Indicate why you believe that it is, in fact, a researchable problem. This section could be combined with the literature review, or form a sub-section of it.

4. Literature review

This part of the proposal should anchor your research topic in the particular area of academic debate pertinent to the field. An adequate literature review is required in all research proposals. The length is not important. Keep it as succinct as possible. You should:

- Provide evidence to the M.Sc. (by Research) Committee that you are well-acquainted with recent and current research in the field of study;
- Prove that the dissertation will not duplicate past or current research; and
- Indicate how the intended research relates to, and engages with, similar and past research.
- Include references to literature pertaining to the chosen theoretical framework of your study.

The literature review positions your research within the existing body of knowledge, and shows how your study will contribute to it. If you want to take up a theoretical position or a specific concept, identify which positions and concepts are useful and how you will apply them to achieve a particular result or conclusion.

5. Objectives of the research

Identify and clarify the aims and objectives of the research. Where feasible, they should be numbered. They will be evaluated in terms of whether the objectives are well-articulated

and whether they are realistic and attainable. In writing the proposal, it is important to remain focused on the objectives, always linking them to the research problem.Hypotheses or research questions

If you state hypotheses, indicate whether they are statistical or non-statistical hypotheses. Depending on the nature of your discipline, it may not be necessary to base your research on hypotheses. You may list certain fundamental research questions or underlying assumptions fundamental to your research. These may then be fine-tuned later.

If adopting the qualitative approach, the applicant must provide a clear key research question, with sub-questions as necessary.

6. Research design and methodology

Outline how you will approach your topic, providing a rationale for your decisions. Explain how your chosen method or approach is suited to the topic and how it will serve to advance your study. Describe how you plan to gather (qualitative and/or quantitative) data. While it may not be possible to give the finer details of your methodology at the research proposal stage, it is important to give the framework and a sound indication of its applicability so that the evaluator is satisfied that your methodology is relevant and acceptable. How will you ensure reliability? What are the ethical implications?

Clarify your method of investigation:

For qualitative studies, this may involve:
- Reflections on the design of the study, including the justification for the qualitative approach
- Planning the Interview Guide
- Discussing how the participants will be recruited and selected
- Discussing how the the data will be captured
- Discussing how the data will be analysed
- Reflections on how to deal with biases
- Reflecting on the ethical issues surrounding the study, etc.

For quantitative studies, this may involve:
- Research Tools and Instruments
- Surveys
- Anticipated or approximate size of sample
- Population
- Reflections on the design of the study
- Discussing how the participants will be recruited and selected
- Diversity and representation
- Prevention of bias
- Indicate any statistical methods that you will use to analyse the data and

substantiate why you intend using the proposed specific statistical methods, etc.

In all cases, indicate whether ethics approval is required, and consequently if you intend to apply for ethics clearance through the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC).

The proposal should make clear if the research instruments or tools (for example questionnaires) are validated.

A selected validated instrument must have a cited reference to support it.

7. Significance and contribution of the research

Indicate the significance of the research. Why is it important? Whom, or what aspect of the profession/discipline/population, will it benefit? Does it have significance for policy-makers? How does it contribute to the existing research and field of knowledge? A statement will suffice.

8. Expected outcomes, results, findings of the research

What are the expected outcomes of the research? What do you wish to ultimately achieve?

9. Timeframe

The various tasks for researching and the writing of the dissertation should be identified along with the specific dates by which it is anticipated these tasks will be completed. This timeframe would need to be displayed in table or Gantt chart form. When producing this timeframe, keep the length of the course in mind (5 semesters long when studying part-time).

10. Costings/budget/funding, if applicable

Any research-related expenses should be stated. An indication of acquired funding or any plan to acquire funds should also be identified.

11. Reference list and bibliography

The List of References is a list of the literature referred to in your research proposal. It will be assumed that you have read the references you list.

Distinguish clearly between your list of references cited and your bibliography. The latter includes all material consulted, including background reading not necessarily cited.

The research proposal does not need to be finalised at the stage before registration. It will be finalised on confirmation from UREC. However, the prospective student is expected to immediately contact the Masters (by Research) Committee via the relevant supervisor if there is a substantial departure of direction from the previously proposed study. The supervisor will guide the Committee on this matter if it arises. In all cases changes must also be communicated in writing.

The Master (by Research) course at the Centre for Labour Studies, University of Malta is regulated by the Bye-Laws of 2024 for the Degree of Master of Science and the General Regulations for University Postgraduate Awards, 2021:

https://www.um.edu.mt/media/um/docs/about/governance/regulations/general/GeneralRegul ationsforUniversityPostgraduateAwards.pdf

and

The Bye-Laws for the award of the degree of Master of Science in Work and Organisational Behaviour - M.Sc. - under the auspices of the Centre for Labour Studies.

This checklist is intended as a guide for evaluators, to enhance harmonisation in the approach to evaluating research proposals. The evaluator may wish to tick a criterion, put a cross next to it or indicate not applicable (NA). The evaluator's final comments would be based on this checklist and submitted to the Centre's Office, indicating viability, conditional viability, or not viable.

1. Problem identification

1.1 Is the problem/line of enquiry clearly defined?

1.2 Is the basic research problem well formulated, or is it poorly and vaguely structured?

1.3 Is it briefly and concisely stated?

1.4 Does the researcher indulge in jargon which obscures rather than explains what the research problem is?

2. Background to the research problem

2.1 Has there been an adequate description of the background to the problem either under a separate heading or as part of the literature review?

2.2 Has the area of concern regarding the problem been identified, i.e., has the need that exists to research the problem been clarified?

2.3 Have the basic terms and concepts been clarified, either under a separate heading, or as a suitable sub-heading?

3. Literature review

3.1 Is there clear evidence of an adequate review of the literature?

3.2 Is there a theoretical engagement with the relevant literature?

3.3 Does the literature review provide an adequate theoretical framework for the study?

3.4 Has appropriate literature been examined in order to provide the background and rationale to the problem and its formulation? Has the demonstrated background reading been sufficiently extensive to give a sense of the study's contribution?

3.5 Have relevant sources been used to identify the problem?

3.6 Does the literature review correspond with the aims of the research?

3.7 Are the cited references acceptable?

3.8 Are textual references and bibliographic citation correct in line with APA 7th edition?

4. Conceptual framework

4.1 To what extent are the conceptual framework and theoretical assumptions clearly stated?

4.2 Has the study been clearly delineated under a separate heading or sub-heading, i.e., have the boundaries of the research been stated?

4.3 Has a suitable hypothesis (or hypotheses) been formulated, or has a suitable research question (or research questions) been stated?

5. Aim, objectives, hypotheses, or research questions

5.1 Has the aim been stated clearly?

5.2 Where applicable, have the objectives and hypotheses been stated clearly?

5.3 Where applicable, have the research questions been stated clearly?

6. Research design

6.1 Is the outlined project and research design well-structured?

6.2 Has the research methodology been articulated clearly?

6.3 Is there a clear correspondence between the stated aims of the research and the chosen methodology?

6.4 Does the outline of the qualitative and/or quantitative research methods to be used go beyond a mere statement, in providing reasoned justification for their use?

6.5 Have the sampling methodology and data collection been adequately clarified?

6.7 Is the analysis appropriate to the aims of the research?

7. Significance

7.1 To what extent will the research analyse and diagnose a particular problem, set it out logically, arrive at conclusions and where appropriate, make proposals for the solution of the problem?

7.2 Why is it important to undertake this research? Who will benefit, or for whom will the research be important?

7.3 Is the proposed research likely to promote further investigation within and/or across disciplines and fields?

7.4 Has the expected outcome(s) of the research been clearly identified?

8. Feasibility

8.1 Is the problem researchable and is the project feasible? Do the preliminary data, proposed timeline, and available resources support its feasibility?

8.2 Does the candidate's academic profile or potential support his/her ability to accomplish the project?

8.3 Does the proposed supervisor (or supervisors) have a research and supervision profile to support the candidate?

9. Other general comments

Is the proposal well-structured or poorly compiled? If the latter, what should be done to make it a well-structured proposal?

10. Language

Has the research proposal been proofread and edited?