

Putting a proposal together

Your proposal is a very significant part of the application. When we assess candidates for admission and/ or scholarships, we look at the application form and proposal together. We are looking for applicants with demonstrable academic skills and capacity, and proposals that have intrinsic merit and fit our research profile and supervisory expertise. The more you can tell us about the importance of your topic and the chances that you are personally well able or equipped to carry it out, the more likely you are to be successful in your application.

You should therefore try between now and whenever you finally choose to submit your application to develop and fine-tune a specific proposal which covers most or all of the following elements in some depth (it's fine that the project might change or evolve a little, or even a lot, were you to eventually start the PhD – that is normal. But a well-developed proposal at this stage shows us that you understand the building blocks and general intellectual process.)

If you would like some feedback on a draft proposal from someone with specific expertise, you can use our staff profile pages, or write to the Research Director or one of the PhD coordinators, to identify and contact faculty members who you think may be interested eventually in supervising your project, if successful. Bear in mind however that they may be very busy and, especially in the lead-up to the scholarship deadlines, there is no guarantee that they can give you lengthy guidance. So start as early as possible, and send them a draft for comments rather than simply repeating a general enquiry.

Think about including:

1) A tentative title

2) Research question(s) and any related hypotheses

What do you really want to find out? What is it that we currently do not know, and need to know, about this issue/ topic/ country/ phenomenon/ institution? Where do you think the answer to those questions might lie?

3) Literature review/ survey of existing scholarship

What have you already read, that has convinced you that your question is important and novel but can also be answered? What are the discipline(s) (law, politics, other) that you have studied in or read within that lead you to think about this question in the way you now do, or define its central terms in particular ways? Who has done important work on this already? What is perhaps missing, in your view, from this work? Let us know in this section what discipline(s) you yourself are trained in or think you can comfortably use in your work.

4) Methodology

What exactly would you propose to do, and why would this be the best, or a good, way to answer the research question? Does your topic lend itself to theoretical work, black letter law, single case study, comparative case study, sociolegal approaches, qualitative work ... do you anticipate doing fieldwork? Why, where, and for how long? Do you have the research training and language skills you would need in order to implement your chosen method? If not, have you thought about how you will acquire those as part of your three-year programme (or before starting on it)?

5) Contribution of the conclusions

Say if possible what you think you will discover and why/ to whom it might matter. How might your research be useful or interesting if it turns out the way you anticipate?

6) Assessment of feasibility

Show that you have thought about how you will fit the plan into a three year programme; and that the topic and methods are manageable for you because you already have, or know you can acquire, the skills required (ie talk a little about the fit between you and your project).

The whole draft should be about 2000 words long. If you draw it up as a Word document, you will be able to attach it to the electronic application as and when you finally decide to go ahead. The next stage, were you to be shortlisted, would be interviews – usually some time in March, if you apply for a scholarship. These can be done by phone or Skype if you are not able to be here, though obviously it is to your advantage and ours if you can come along in person and get a feel of where you would be studying should you to be offered a place.