

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.

The whole draft should be about 2000-3000 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 virtually if you are not able to be here, though obviously in ordinary circumstances 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.

Think about including the following in your proposal:

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). If you are proposing fieldwork do you need to consider backup plans in case the fieldwork becomes impracticable or impossible?

Common Pitfalls

1) 'This is an interesting and topical area'

Sometimes applicants spend a lot of space explaining how the proposal deals with an interesting and topical issue. Often it is necessary to provide such background but this must be kept brief. That an issue is interesting and topical does not tell a reviewer what your project will do. Tell us what *you will do* and *how*.

2) No clear research question

The usual way of telling us what you want to do is to formulate a research question. Sometimes a proposal lacks a clear research question. Ensure there is a clear research question (or small number of questions) and that this will be obvious to the reviewers.

3) Not feasible to do within 36 months

Sometimes proposals are too ambitious or general or vague and would require much more than 36 months to finish.

4) Relevance to the academic literature not clear

A PhD should make an original contribution to academic literature. You are not expected to know your conclusions of course but you need to give a sense of how you will engage with the academic literature. It sometimes happens that a proposal is devoted exclusively to discussions of doctrinal legal sources or exclusively to policy issues. These are certainly relevant but there must be engagement with the academic literature.

5) Not clear why Ulster Law is a good home for the project

Sometimes proposals come in but it is not obvious why the applicant wants to come to Ulster or which supervisors would be suitable for the project. For instance, someone may have a proposal exclusively about the law of a country or topic where we have no expertise. Do some homework as to our research strengths and publications. The [PURE](#) portal makes it easy to search our research publications.

6) Methodology/methods vague, irrelevant or very generic

Explain what you want to do and *how*. Sometimes proposals are very vague or brief on the proposed methods. Or they propose methods without clearly relating them to the research question(s). In some proposals it seems that methods are proposed because they sound impressive but if they are not relevant to the research question(s) this will detract from the proposal.

Occasionally proposals include a few sentences that are repetitive of opening paragraphs in methods textbooks. It is good to read these but again try to make sure what you write is relevant to your own proposal and research questions.

7) Ethical issues but no clear discussion of ethics

A common and serious pitfall is to propose methods that necessarily raise ethical issues but then fail to discuss the ethical implications. This is often the case when proposing to use interviews or focus groups or the like. For some projects it may be necessary to consider not just ethical obligations towards research participants but also towards the researcher (ie is there a risk to the researcher?). There may also be questions of research integrity and about the positionality of the researcher.