

How to apply for a PhD in Economics

Guidance notes for enquirers

These notes are to advise anyone planning to submit a research degree proposal and CV for consideration by the School of Economics.

Such an initial proposal and an accompanying CV are required as part of any formal application to enrol for a research degree. Although the decision as to whether or not a student will be invited to enrol must be arrived at through the formal applications process, we can also consider proposals on an initial informal basis in order to determine whether or not the proposed research falls within the topic areas for which we can offer supervision.

Previous qualifications

MPhil / PhD: Normally we require at least a good upper second class undergraduate award in a relevant subject. For PhD registration particularly, we prefer that applicants already have a postgraduate qualification which has introduced them to appropriate subject knowledge and/or research and writing skills. Students without this postgraduate preparation should expect that a doctoral research project could require an additional year to complete.

MA by Research: Normally we require at least a second class honours undergraduate award in a relevant subject.

We will consider application from candidates without the normal qualifications only if they can show other relevant evidence of ability, for example relevant work experience.

Applicants whose first language is not English must show evidence of sufficient language competence.

Outline Proposals

The outline proposal is a basis from which staff will make an initial assessment of whether a student shows potential for successful completion of a research degree. You must include such a proposal if making a formal application. If you wish to make informal enquiry prior to a formal application then you should do so by submitting a proposal according to these guidelines with a covering note of explanation and a brief CV to show your education and other relevant experience.

MA/MSc by Research

For an MA/MSc by Research we require a proposal of 400 - 800 words that covers the following points.

- A draft title;
- a description of the proposed topic
 - what is the general area of enquiry?
 - what particular issues are intended to be considered within this?
- an appreciation of existing relevant research literature
 - what key books/articles define the current understanding of the general area of enquiry?
 - what published research has considered issues related to or similar to your own focus of enquiry?
 - how will your own work contribute?
 - How will it connect to and enhance existing work?
 - How will it avoid replicating existing work?
- a draft plan for the chapters, being their draft titles and a brief statement of purpose for each of them;
- an assessment of the type of information resources, e.g. statistical sources, that may be required and an assessment of their availability.

MPhil / PhD

We require a more extended proposal than for MA/MSc by research. This is because an extended research degree programme can be costly to the student in time and money and has very ambitious learning targets. We do not want to recruit students who have not shown us and themselves that they have a good chance of successful completion.

The proposal must cover at least the points listed above for proposals regarding MA/MSc by research and should treat these matters in a way that demonstrates a postgraduate level of knowledge and understanding. The structure of your proposal is a matter for your own judgement. The following sequence might serve but is not obligatory:

Title;

Topic: describing the general subject area within which your project is located;

Motivation: explaining why your proposed research will be of interest – academically and practically;

Literature Survey: identifying important items of existing literature that define key aspects of the current state of knowledge;

Research Questions: particular questions that your research will seek to answer;

Proposed Methodology: the methods you will use to answer the research questions;

Assessment of Resource Requirements: the (e.g.) primary data creation, secondary data sources, computing facilities, laboratory facilities that are required by the proposed methodology;

Proposed Schedule of Work: a draft plan for the sequence and duration of the major tasks that constitute the proposed research project;

Assessment of Personal Development Needs: the knowledge and skills you will need to develop in order to conduct the proposed research;

Bibliography: a listing of any items of literature or other sources that you have referred to in previous sections

If enrolled as a research student then you might expect to review and refine your proposal, in consultation with your supervisor(s), during your first year. Your revised plans may even come to differ in some respects from your initial proposal. Your initial proposal is not primarily a constraint upon your research but rather a demonstration that your knowledge and skills justify you taking the step of enrolling on a research degree programme and that you have in mind a feasible topic of research.

Here are some pointers to issues that you should address in your initial proposal. If other issues occur to you then include them also.

Size: The proposal should be at least 500 words in length, preferably longer. Excluding the bibliography and any appendices, it should not normally be necessary to exceed 1500 words.

Title: Suggest a working title for your eventual thesis which gives an indication of your intended focus. Don't worry if you are not absolutely convinced by the title – you will be free to change it for formal registration.

Topic: Describe the general academic discipline area(s) within which your topic falls. Presumably some branch(es) of economics will feature in this description. Describe your particular intended topic and focus. If you have more than one possibility in mind then describe each of them. If your possible topics fall in distinctly different discipline areas then you might need to submit separate proposals.

Motivation: Why is the proposed research interesting / useful / important? Will it illuminate any debates within the academic literature? Will it inform our understanding of some events / structures / behaviour in the real world? – to the point of illuminating discussions of (e.g.) commercial strategy or government policy?

Literature: Present a literature survey that confirms the existence of a body of research related to your topic and shows your understanding of some key features of this literature:

e.g. major axes of debate, influential contributions and significant challenges to or revisions of these, maybe some less central contributions that serve to connect the literature to your own planned research, some assessment of whether the issues you intend to focus upon have already been considered and, if so, why there is still room in the literature for your own contribution.

The surveyed literature should normally consist mainly of articles in peer-reviewed academic journals. Normally a sufficient number of these should be recent enough to demonstrate that this is an active area of research. Including some unpublished working papers in your survey may also provide evidence that your proposed topic is of current academic interest. Including some references to non-academic sources, e.g. government papers or current affairs journals, may show that research in this area is likely to have impact outside of the academic literature. The less connected is your intended research to currently active debates, the greater is your obligation to demonstrate that your planned research is well-motivated.

Hypotheses: In the context of your description of topic, motivation and literature, propose one or more questions that you hope to answer by your research. Motivate these by reference to their relevance to academic debate and/or to policy issues in government or the private sector.

Methodology: Describe the methods you will use to investigate the proposed hypotheses. These are sometimes statistical in nature, sometimes historical or theoretical, sometimes a mix. Possibly refer to examples of published research whose methodological approach you intend to emulate. Possibly make some reference to your previous education or other experience in which you have developed the skills that will be required to pursue your preferred methodological approach.

Collaborating Organisations: If your project depends upon the goodwill or active support of some organisation outside of the University then describe this in some detail and propose how that collaboration might be secured.

Information Resources: Assess the information that you will need to acquire over and above academic literature. Examples might include statistical information, laws and regulations, policy guidelines in one or more countries. Assess the availability of this information.

Primary Data Acquisition: Will your research require the construction of any data sets not all ready available? Examples might include a questionnaire survey or the collation of information from official sources in a form not normally published. If your project requires primary data then describe why it will be needed, what the method will be, what resources the data acquisition exercise will require and how you expect the data acquisition to be funded.

Research Skills Training: Make a preliminary assessment of your particular training / skills development needs that should be addressed if you enrol as a research student pursuing your proposed topic. For example, will you need to attend any classes in economic theory?

Or econometrics? Do you already have considerable expertise in using English for academic purposes? Are you thoroughly familiar with office software (WordProcessor, Spreadsheet etc)? Will you need to learn how to use any special software – e.g. statistical packages? Do you know how to conduct literature searches, including via electronic databases? Do you have well developed Internet search skills? Do you already have experience of making live presentations? In English?

Bibliography: your list of references should be presented according to some internationally accepted standard, preferably the Harvard system. Your written text should make reference to the items in the bibliography using some standard method, preferably Harvard style. Do not include items in the bibliography that you have not referred to in your written text; do not refer to items that are not present in your bibliography.

Appendices: Appendices are not always necessary but might be useful on occasion. Generally, if you wish to introduce information that could divert attention from the flow of argument if included in the main text of your proposal, then add the information as an appendix and refer the reader to it from within your main text. For example, you may wish to present, as an appendix, a list of potential data sources which is too long to be included in your main text.

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