

School of Agriculture, Policy and Development, University of Reading

Guidelines on writing a PhD research proposal

The most important advice first: aim for clarity and keep it simple (your PhD will get complicated later, no need to rush it now).

Your proposal must demonstrate that you understand the current state of the art in your area, can come up with an interesting question targeting a gap in that understanding and can describe a research methodology that will get you the answers you seek.

As a result, the SAPD PhD research proposal form will ask you for the following:

- a) **Aims and rationale for the research:** what do you want to research and why is this important to you and the field? A general statement of a problem or issue in your professional work and/or in your reading of academic research. This will lead to a more detailed statement under heading c).
- b) **State of the art:** current understanding in relevant literature which you have consulted and some major works within each. Not a full bibliography or review, just a brief outline of the main concepts, key theoretical positions and lines of research relevant to your study. You need to establish how your proposed study fits into the particular domain and how it is designed to fill gaps in our knowledge and/or improve previous work.
- c) **Research questions to be answered or hypotheses to be tested:** these can be stated in fairly general terms or be very specific – depending on your area of interest. A good question would be linked to controversies and gaps in previous research and possibly to your own experience. A good question would also be answerable within the limits of a PhD.
- d) **Research design:** information on whether this is a qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods study, with key information about how the data will be generated, analysed and presented. You may state the independent and dependent variables that will be studied and briefly comment on the power of the experiments or observations you propose. You can show what data sources you want to engage with, what methodologies or instruments will be employed, or how feasible your study is.
- e) **Outcomes and potential impact:** general indication of the finding of your research and how the results might affect theory and practice in the field.