

Applicant Guidance for Law and/or Human Rights - MPhil / PhD programmes

Section 1. Guidance in Making your Application

Section 2. Guidance in Applying for Scholarships

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This guidance provides detail of what is expected of a good research proposal. However, it is important to consider the following overarching issues in developing your proposal:

- Your proposal should not suggest a wholly descriptive project. Instead, you should identify a gap in existing research and define the extent to which your proposed project will address this gap; and
- The scope of your proposed project must be such that it can be feasibly completed within the confines of a PhD thesis.

Considerations when drafting your proposal

A research proposal provides an opportunity for applicants to demonstrate their ability to write a clear, coherent and structured plan upon which a PhD programme could be undertaken. A clear and focused proposal is therefore a crucial part of the application, even though it is to be expected that the research project itself would evolve and change over the course of the programme.

Following the first phase of review of applications, an interview is necessary if the University considers that the proposal would fit within the scope of its research criteria and if it has the supervisory capacity to accommodate the project.

Successful applicants are allocated two main supervisors for their PhD programmes.

When drafting your proposal, it is important to consider how the research would enrich existing approaches in a particular field and what contribution it would make to knowledge in the area. Such a contribution can be made in a number of different ways and therefore it is important that the proposal considers carefully the methodology and any theoretical framework that would be used to achieve its goals.

Word Count

The proposal should be between 1500 and 2000 words in total (excluding references and bibliography).

Recommended Approach

We recommend that any proposal includes the following:

1. Title. The title should indicate the key words associated with your research. Titles invariably change later in research projects but at this stage it is important to use it to provide an indication of important aspects that make it easy for a reader to gain a firm understanding of the nature of the project. For example, if it is intended that the research will be comparative in nature, this should be indicated and if a particular theoretical approach is to be adopted, then this should also be made clear.

2. Introduction. The introduction can be used to identify the major issue, problem, or gap in knowledge that the proposal seeks to address. It should also state in overview, how it would go about addressing that issue. In essence it should be a short but effective summary that explains the importance of the research that you intend to carry out, why it is necessary and how it would be conducted.

3. Research questions. Research questions are a crucial aspect of any research proposal as they specifically define the key issues that the research will seek to investigate. It is particularly important to demonstrate that you will be addressing issues that have not been investigated before and as such good research questions will be anchored alongside a firm understanding of current literature and developments in the area concerned.

4. Existing literature and current developments. To develop originality and to be able to contribute usefully to any given field, it is crucial that a proposal acknowledges the current status of the literature and important developments in that field. A significant proportion of any PhD project will be involved in examining in greater depth the literature, existing developments and resources related to it. However, a strong knowledge of the state of these aspects at the proposal writing stage is necessary if a proposal is to have merit. Therefore, specific sources should be identified and cited. Where possible, the most up to date resources should be referred to. It is not necessary to provide an in-depth summary but it is important to demonstrate the way that existing literature, current developments and knowledge can be further developed, or where important gaps exist in which further research could usefully contribute to the field. Your proposal should be well referenced and must include an indicative bibliography. This section does not count towards the word count but is crucial in the professionalism of any proposal.

5. Methodology (Max 500 words). It is important to indicate clearly the type of methods and methodology that will be employed to conduct the research that you are proposing. Therefore, the proposal should not only explain the methodological approach that is intended but it should also explain why that approach would be adopted and how it would provide a pathway to answer the research questions that the project seeks to answer. As such whether it is proposed that the project includes a black-letter law approach, empirical analysis, quantitative or qualitative methods, comparative methods, a socio-legal or theoretical approach, or any other type of analytical method, it is important that this is included in the proposal along with an explanation for its use. Additionally, consideration should be given to specific methods if fieldwork is to be undertaken and any associated ethical issues need to be taken into account. During the early stages of a PhD project, the methodological aspects of the project would be discussed and developed further with the supervisory team, however some clarity of the overall intention is required in the PhD proposal itself.

6. Timeline and outline of chapters It is important to include a realistic timeline and outline of chapters that indicates the word-count for each chapter and the completion month and year for them.

Such plans often change as a research project develops, however it is important to demonstrate a clear and workable plan at this stage. It should also indicate any periods required for fieldwork.

7. Research environment statement. This section should address why Essex is your chosen research environment. In particular, direct reference should be made to the research expertise of members of staff, in relation to your proposal. (Please note that it is not necessary to contact specific members of staff in advance of making an application in which you name them as potential supervisors.) Should your application be successful, there is no guarantee that you will be supervised by the members of staff you have identified as potential supervisors.

Further Tips for applicants

In developing your application, it is useful to consider the primary reasons why some applications are unsuccessful at the initial screening stage. These reasons include:

- The applicant does not meet the minimum entry requirements for the chosen programme;
- The quality of the research proposal; and
- The lack of available supervisory capacity.

Please ensure that you are fully informed of the eligibility requirements for your chosen degree programme. Where you do not meet all the requirements, but you feel that you have substantial experience in lieu of the eligibility requirement, you can still proceed with your application. In such an instance, you must address the extent to which your experience equips you for the programme in your personal statement.

It is also important to be aware that unfortunately we do sometimes have to reject very good applications, including those in fields where the University of Essex has a particularly strong reputation. This can be due to a number of factors outside of the control of individual applicants, including, staff research leave and staff capacity.

N.B. All applications should be made on the University's PGR online application system at:

<https://www1.essex.ac.uk/pgapply/login.aspx>

Section 2. Guidance in Applying for Scholarships

Some, but certainly not all, postgraduate research students at the University of Essex benefit from scholarship or external funding to assist them with their studies. There are different possible sources through which funding can be found.

The following guidance relates chiefly to the two specific funding consortia that the University of Essex is directly affiliated but further details of other sources are also given.

CHASE – Scholarship Funding

CHASE stands for the Consortium for the Humanities and Arts South East England. It provides different types of postgraduate funding and support across a range of subject areas and it includes doctoral scholarships for UK and international students. [Further details can be found here.](#) This consortium opens its scheme for student led applicants in September / October each year and the closing date is in January of the following year. Successful applicants will receive funding to start their PhD programmes in October of that year.

The scheme requires applicants to have made a prior application to the University of Essex (although acceptance by the University is not a pre-requisite to apply). Applicants will need to identify a supervisor within the School who will agree to act as one of the supervisors for the proposed project and endorse the application by submitting a supporting statement. Therefore, those who wish to apply are encouraged to begin the process early to enable them to engage with a potential supervisor accordingly.

SeNNS – Scholarship Funding

SeNNS stands for the South-East Network for Social Sciences. It provides different types of postgraduate funding and support across the social sciences and it includes doctoral scholarships for UK and international students. [Further details can be found here.](#) Within the field of law, it provides scholarships for research that can be categorised as ‘socio-legal’ in nature. One of the features that distinguishes this scheme is that it not only provides scholarships for PhD research but also for those seeking to undertake a Masters programme followed by a PhD. Scholarships can also be tailored in length to provide specific research training in advance of a PhD programme.

The scheme requires applicants to have made a prior application to the University of Essex (although acceptance by the University is not a pre-requisite to apply). Applicants will need to identify a supervisor within the School who will agree to act as one of the supervisors for the proposed project and endorse the application by submitting a supporting statement. Therefore, those who wish to apply are encouraged to begin the process early to enable them to engage with a potential supervisor accordingly.

Other sources of Scholarship Funding

In addition to the above funding consortia, there is a range of other alternative funding sources for research degrees. The University of Essex [Scholarship Finder](#) can be of assistance in identifying them. Further scholarship funding details are also available at: <https://www1.essex.ac.uk/fees-and-funding/research/scholarships/default.aspx>.