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Graduate Research Proposals in Law

1 Introduction

To apply for admission to a graduate research programme (either PhD or LLM) at the School of Law at the University of Galway, you must prepare a research proposal and send it to an appropriate supervisor. This document sets out your planned thesis topic, research questions, methodology, literature review, and more. The research proposal is a crucial first step, as it will be carefully evaluated by your intended supervisor and, if the supervisor is happy with it, by the doctoral admission committee to determine if you and your project have the potential for success. This document is a general guide to the expected components of the proposal and the key factors that its intended readers will be looking for. Adherence to the requirements set out in this guide does not, by itself, guarantee admission as there can be many reasons why a particular member of staff may not be able to supervise your work. Some of the guidance may not be applicable to your particular project.

2 Components of a Graduate Research Proposal in Law

The proposal should be substantial (generally 2000 to 3000 words) but not lengthy (5000 words is probably too long). The structure of a proposal can vary, but it will generally include the following sections.

1. Introduction

The introduction provides a concise overview of the topic, its relevance, and the research questions you seek to address. It should establish the context of your study within existing literature, identify gaps or controversies, and articulate the significance of your research endeavour. In the introduction, you should also outline the objectives and scope of your research, providing readers with a clear understanding of what to expect. What legal issues, debates, or knowledge gaps have piqued your curiosity? Why is further scholarly examination of this topic important?

2.1 Literature Review

A thorough literature review is a core component of a research proposal. It entails a critical examination of existing scholarship relevant to your research topic. It identifies key theoretical frameworks, methodologies, empirical findings, and debates within the field. A robust literature review not only demonstrates your familiarity with existing research but also highlights the gaps or inconsistencies that your study aims to address. Explore and critically analyse major sources that are relevant to your research questions, including laws, policies, cases, articles and books. Identify the key perspectives, agreements and disagreements, knowledge gaps, and possibilities for new insights that your work could contribute. Your

review should be analytical, systematic, and organised thematically or chronologically to provide coherence and clarity. A simple listing of authors or key works will not suffice.

2.2 Research Questions and Hypotheses

Formulating precise and relevant research questions is essential. Your research questions should be grounded in theoretical and empirical considerations, reflecting the objectives of your project. Generally, you will have one core research question and subsidiary questions that follow from that. Clear and focused research questions enable you to maintain coherence and direction throughout your research process. A long list of questions with no clear connection or hierarchy indicates a proposal that is not yet sufficiently developed.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework serves as the lens through which you will examine your research problem. It provides the conceptual foundation for your study and guides the development of your research questions, hypotheses (if applicable), and methodological approach. Your theoretical framework may draw from various legal theories, jurisprudential perspectives, or interdisciplinary approaches. Whether you adopt a positivist, socio-legal, or critical perspective, it is crucial to justify your choice of theoretical framework and articulate its relevance to your research questions. Moreover, you should explain key concepts, define terms, and highlight the theoretical propositions that inform your analysis. A proposal without a strong theoretical foundation is unlikely to be convincing.

2.4 Methodology

The methodology section outlines the research design, data collection methods, and analytical techniques you plan to employ. In law, research methodologies may vary depending on the nature of your research questions and the empirical or doctrinal orientation of your study. Common methodologies in legal research include doctrinal analysis, comparative legal analysis, case studies, surveys, interviews, and archival research. It is imperative to justify your choice of methodology, discuss potential limitations, and address ethical considerations pertaining to data collection and analysis. Interdisciplinary and particularly socio-legal approaches have become popular but the appropriate use of doctrinal method can still be more than sufficient if the underlying research question is strong. Your choice of method should be focused on how best to answer your research question rather than by a desire to seem current.

2.5 Data Collection and Analysis Plan

If your research involves empirical data, this section outlines your plan for data collection, sampling procedures, and data analysis techniques. Specify the sources of data, whether primary or secondary, and elucidate your rationale for selecting particular cases, jurisdictions, or datasets. Describe how you intend to analyse the data, whether through qualitative coding, statistical analysis, or other analytical approaches. Additionally, discuss potential challenges or biases inherent in your data and propose strategies to mitigate them. You should address any potential ethical considerations, such as informed consent, data protection, and privacy issues, and outline strategies for managing risks or challenges. Not all proposals will require this section or all of its elements, but if it is necessary, it should be thought through thoroughly.

2.6 Significance and Contribution

Articulating the significance and contribution of your research is key in demonstrating its scholarly and practical relevance. Discuss how your study addresses theoretical debates, fills gaps in existing literature, or contributes to policy discourse in the field of law. Emphasise the potential implications of your findings for legal scholarship, practice, or social change. Consider the broader intellectual and societal significance of your research, highlighting its innovative aspects or interdisciplinary dimensions. What new understandings might emerge

from your inquiry? How might your work contribute novel perspectives, challenge existing assumptions, or offer new frameworks for policy or future research in the field? Why does this line of investigation matter for the advancement of legal scholarship or society more broadly?

2.7 Chapter Outline

To demonstrate how you visualise structuring the thesis, provide an overview of the intended chapters. This could include sections dedicated to the foundational literature, theoretical frameworks, data/evidence presentation, analysis, conclusions, etc. The chapter outline manifests your early thinking on the narrative flow and logic of how you will develop and present your argument.

2.8 Timeline and Plan

As a graduate thesis will take years to complete, provide a feasible timeline estimating how you plan to make progress and balance the components of research, analysis, and writing over an extended period. This shows you have thought through the resources, effort, and realistic pacing required. Additionally, you should identify the resources required for your research, such as access to legal databases, research facilities, or specialized software, and outline strategies for securing these resources.

2.9 Bibliography

Include an bibliography of sources that are foundational for your topic and those you expect will figure prominently in your literature review, theoretical grounding, and evidentiary base. This gives a sense of the depth of your preparatory research and familiarity with the key voices in the field.

3 Evaluation Criteria for Graduate Research Proposals in Law

When evaluating your research proposal, assessors will typically consider the following criteria:

1. *Clarity and Coherence*: Your proposal should be well-organized, logically structured, and presented in a clear and concise manner, with smooth transitions between sections and a consistent flow of ideas.
2. *Significance and Originality*: Assessors will evaluate the potential contribution of your proposed research to the field of law, considering its novelty, relevance, and potential impact on legal theory, practice, or policy.
3. *Theoretical Grounding and Literature Review*: Your proposal should demonstrate a strong command of relevant theoretical frameworks and a comprehensive understanding of existing literature, including the ability to critically analyse and synthesize diverse sources.
4. *Methodological Rigour*: The proposed research methodology should be appropriate, well-justified, and aligned with the research questions and objectives. Assessors will evaluate the suitability of your chosen methods, data collection strategies, and analytical techniques, as well as your ability to address potential ethical considerations.
5. *Feasibility and Time Management*: Your proposal should demonstrate the feasibility of your research project within the allocated timeframe and resources, taking into account potential challenges or limitations and proposing strategies to mitigate them.
6. *Scholarly Writing and Presentation*: Assessors will evaluate the overall quality of your writing, including the clarity of expression, adherence to academic conventions, and the appropriate use of references and citations.

Assessment will not necessarily follow a rigid rubric, however, and do not assume that the reader will adopt a 'checklist' approach. What will make your proposal stand out are signs of a valuable potential contribution to knowledge, ability for sharp critical thinking, and effective communication skills. The proposal needs to make a convincing case for how the research could generate new insights that genuinely advance legal scholarship or have meaningful real-world impact. It should also demonstrate a nuanced grasp of the existing literature and a well-reasoned, analytically rigorous plan for tackling the research questions. Just as importantly, the writing quality and clear articulation of the study's significance provide a window into the candidate's talents as a scholar and communicator. Those are the key aspects that you must impress the reader with.

4 Conclusion

Crafting a graduate research proposal in law requires careful attention to detail, scholarly rigour, and clarity of expression. By adhering to the suggestions outlined in this document and addressing the evaluation criteria employed by reviewers, potential applicants can develop robust and compelling proposals and progress to graduate study at the School of Law at the University of Galway. Developing a good proposal takes time – give it the effort that it deserves. Get feedback on your drafts from trusted peers and mentors. Use these guidelines as a flexible framework to get started and deviate from them as seems necessary. Throughout, ensure that your proposal will be clearly relevant and compelling to the eventual reader.