

PhD/MPhil Research Proposal Guidelines*

As part of the application for admission onto our MPhil and PhD programmes, you must prepare a research proposal outlining your proposed area of study.

A research proposal is a concise and coherent summary of your proposed research. It outlines the general area of study within which your research falls, referring to the current state of knowledge and any recent debates on the topic and sets out the key issues or questions that you intend to address.

The research proposal is the most important part of your PhD application. It gives you an opportunity to demonstrate that you have the ability for postgraduate level research, for example, by demonstrating that you can communicate complex ideas clearly, concisely and critically within the required timescale. We do not expect the proposal to be perfect. However, we refer to the research proposal to help us decide whether you would be a suitable candidate to study at MPhil/PhD level and assess it on its quality, originality and coherence. The proposal also helps us to match your research interest with an appropriate supervisor. You may wish to explore our [staff pages](#) and contact member(s) of staff you would like to work with to discuss your proposal prior to formal submission.

Please read and follow the guidelines below carefully.

Your proposal should be **3,000 words** long using the following sections:

1. **Title** – This is a provisional title for your intended research. You will be able to revise your title during the course of your research if you are accepted for admission. It should be simple, descriptive and informative, identifying the topic and/or approach that will be taken. Please include your name and if you have developed the proposal with a member (or members) of our staff, please include their name(s) too.
2. **Background to your proposed research** – You should provide a background to the research area that you aim to explore. You should provide a short literature review in which you will discuss your proposed research within the framework of the existing literature, demonstrate that you understand the theoretical underpinnings and main debates/issues in your research and how your research will make an original and important contribution to the subject. Ideally, you should be able to demonstrate how your proposed research fills a gap in the literature, makes a contribution to existing knowledge in your field and demonstrates scholarly integrity.
3. **Research question and objectives** – You should discuss the central aim(s) and questions that will guide your research. The research aim(s) and objectives determine the scope, depth and the overall direction of the research. You should emphasise what you ultimately want to achieve with your thesis, complemented by focused and feasible objectives i.e., the steps that you will take to answer each of your research questions.
4. **Methodology/Methods** – You should introduce your overall approach to the research. Depending on your discipline and approach, you might begin with a discussion of the rationale and assumptions underpinning your methodology (i.e. key



concepts, paradigms, ideas). Then you should outline, how you plan to conduct the research (i.e., different studies included in the PhD) and the data sources that you will use. You should discuss the type of empirical research (statistical work, interviews, ethnography, surveys etc.) that you will be doing and how you are going to collect and analyse data. You should discuss the methods that you will use for each phase/study of the PhD and why the proposed methods are particularly advantageous or appropriate for answering the research questions. You need to consider and justify the context of the research, as well as the participants (e.g., individuals, small or large groups).

5. **Expected outcomes/benefits and/or impact-** You should briefly outline the potential outcomes of your project and indicate the impact of your research on existing knowledge and understanding in your field. You may wish to include details of the economic benefits or impact on social or cultural or health practices in your field (if applicable).
6. **Ethical considerations-** You should briefly discuss any potential ethical issues related to the proposed area of research. For example, you might consider the sensitivity of your topic to social groups, individuals or special-interest groups and discuss how you would seek to mitigate any potential difficulties or conflicts of interest arising as part of your research. Key ethical issues such as anonymity, confidentiality and informed consent in the context of your research should also be discussed.
7. **Timeframe-** Provide an estimated timeline of the PhD/MPhil thesis, taking into account whether you are applying for full or part-time study. Consider what you would be doing in each year of your PhD/MPhil and when each of the different phases of the PhD will start and finish (e.g., systematic review, interviews, fieldwork, analysis, writing the draft etc). This will help us to evaluate the feasibility of the project.
8. **References** – You should include a complete reference list (not included in the word count). Please use the reference style that you have used for your most recent studies and apply this consistently.

Formatting: Make sure that the formatting of the document is consistent throughout and that the structure is clear (i.e., in a logical order that it is easy for the reader to follow).

Frequently asked questions:

Can the University offer advice with regards to the research proposal?

You are more than welcome to explore our [staff pages](#) and contact members of staff with appropriate expertise to discuss your proposed research. If there is a good fit between your proposed research and our research staff, staff might be happy to work with you and give you advice on the draft of your research proposal before you make a formal application.

How do I check/choose if a potential supervisor is right for me?

You should take an in-depth look into the profiles of eligible research supervisors (provide link) and their academic/research interests. You may look at publications written by the



potential supervisors, for example, books, journal articles. You can also find out about PhD research that your potential supervisor(s) has overseen in the past and/or they are currently involved. We would encourage you to contact potential supervisor(s) and arrange to meet them and discuss your research interest(s).

Is the personal statement different to the research proposal?

These documents are different, however both are important. You should use the personal statement document to provide information about yourself and your previous academic and other experiences and explain why you wish to undertake this research at St Mary's University. Information provided in the personal statement is not included in the research proposal.

What happens after I have submitted my application?

Your application is reviewed to ensure all relevant documents have been provided and the research proposal is assessed to establish if you have the aptitude for postgraduate level research. If all the above criteria are met, then the University will aim to match your research interest with an appropriate supervisor (if you have not already identified someone beforehand). Once a supervisory team has been established, you will be invited to attend a formal interview.

What will happen during the interview?

The interview will last approximately 45 minutes and it is your opportunity to discuss your research proposal in more detail and to demonstrate your enthusiasm and knowledge about your proposed research. You will also be able to see how the supervision team would fit your research area to ensure that you have the most appropriate support for your research project.

What happens after the interview?

The proposed supervisory team will discuss your interview and review your application to consider whether, as a result of the interview, they feel there is a good fit between your proposed research project and the supervisory team available to work with you at St Mary's.

When will I find out if I have been offered a place at the University?

You will be notified by the Research Degrees office about the outcome of the interview and the application within a month after the application closing date.

If you have any questions prior to submitting your application, please contact research@stmarys.ac.uk

** Please note these guidelines were drafted for students applying for courses in Sport, Allied Health and Performance Sciences, but may be helpful to applicants to other Faculties.*