

# 1

## WHAT IS A RESEARCH PROPOSAL?

### CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter discusses:

- the nature of research proposals;
- the general range of skills required to develop proposals;
- disciplinary and national differences in requirements;
- the first steps in meeting the needs of your readership, whether seeking a research degree place or funding for research or both.

### A PERVASIVE TASK DEFINED

For those wishing to engage in research, as a career in itself or as part of an academic engagement, there is no escape from the rigours of writing research proposals. Whether you are at the beginning of your research career, contemplating applying for a university place to study for a research degree, or whether you are a new contract researcher or academic seeking funding to begin or continue your research work, you will be faced with the task of writing a research proposal in an extremely competitive environment. Before you begin, let us first summarise the task, as a prelude to exploring it in depth. A research proposal, in whatever context, is intended to convince others that you have a relevant and interesting topic to research that will provide (in some explicit way) useful results and a sensible idea of how to set about that research in a timely, economical way. In other words, you must convince your target audience that the research itself is worthwhile and that you are an ideal, competent person to conduct it.

## 2 DEVELOPING RESEARCH PROPOSALS

A range of skills and expertise is needed for the task of proposal writing as well as for the research that follows a successful application. Therefore this book is intended to help those who are unfamiliar with the process of proposal writing or who want to improve their chances of success in a complex and demanding field. Indeed, some of the skills and abilities required can be transferred directly from other pursuits once their relevance and importance is understood; others may exist but need some re-alignment to fit the context and yet others may need to be learned. The UK Researcher Development Statement, and its detailed listing of descriptors of attributes across the phases of academic development – the Researcher Development Framework (RDF) (Vitae, 2010) – provide an indication of the diversity of accomplishment and proficiency required at each stage of a research career. Many of these skills and attributes relate directly or indirectly to the writing of research proposals. This should reassure you that you probably have some of the skills required of proposal writing already; you simply need some guidance on when and how to apply them.

We will return to the RDF later (as part of an activity) because we intend to provide a guide to help you identify those attributes that you already possess, those that need some polishing or modification and those that you will be best advised to acquire. In this particular chapter we will start the process by unpicking what the general purpose of a research proposal is from the perspectives of those who require you to present one, so that you can become familiar not just with what you need to achieve in writing the proposal, but why you need to include the various components. Details of the priority of each component, depending on context, will emerge throughout the book.

### A CELEBRATION OF DIFFERENCE

We are conscious that each reader will be in different circumstances, those particularly pertinent to this task of research proposal writing being:

- living and working in diverse parts of the world, perhaps even contemplating a location move;
- links to a particular discipline or small group of disciplines;
- full- or part-time degree registration and/or level of paid employment;
- working/studying within or at a distance from a Higher Education institution (HEI);
- varied extent and recency of prior experience of study;
- current range of relevant skills and attributes.

To begin with the last on the list, in order to emphasise that you do have skills that you can bring to the task, and to help you map your progress in developing other relevant skills, we provide you at the end of this chapter with an

activity that will allow you now and in the future to chart some relevant attributes. Your chart will be specific to you and will enable you to judge which of the suggested further reading materials provided are most relevant for you and which areas of the proposal might need extra attention and perhaps greater peer review (supportive criticism from colleagues – see Chapter 9) before submission.

Although the general focus of this book will be on generic information about the task, and advice relevant to a range of disciplines, we will draw your attention to disciplinary differences where appropriate. Between us, the authors, we have worked in disciplines in the arts and humanities, the social and the natural and life sciences and we have made good use here of our contacts across the disciplines to provide examples and references that highlight any subtleties or distinct differences in purpose, approach and requirements for proposals between disciplines or discipline areas.

Each country will, of course, have its own research funding providers, each of whom will have some degree of idiosyncrasy in its requirements, while universities within any one country, never mind between countries, will have specific entry requirements and interest in different aspects of a limited range of research topics. In this book we will mainly follow the requirements of UK funders and Higher Education institutions (HEIs), but we will note any differences from other locations that we are aware of and will provide some references to books and articles from other countries that might prove useful to you. However, although the main propositions, advice and caveats are universal, with differences appearing mainly in required formats or particular detail (information about which is usually supplied by the funder or HEI to applicants), it will save you time and heartache to heed our advice that follows about how to tailor your proposal to suit each specific institution or funding organisation.

You may have some good ideas already, and even perhaps a first draft of a proposal prepared, but it is nonetheless crucial that you obtain as much information as is available from the particular funding body (or for each funding body) or academic provider that you intend to approach. They are as individually different as each of you as readers are. Draft outlines, or particular paragraphs about detail, may well be transferable between applications but each funder/HEI will have particular style and format requirements as well as requiring some pieces of information that others may not. For instance, the restrictions on word length can vary substantially while protocols for section headings and content also differ. We urge you to resist any urge to produce a generic application to be sent out to any and every funder or university you know; instead, gather your ideas, hone them into good shape but customise them to fit the requirements of each specific audience. Meticulous attention to the guidance notes of the relevant organisation will pay dividends and save heartache. Some relevant websites can be found in Appendix 1. In that appendix we have included some suggestions that attend to the diversity of background and circumstance that you bring with you to the task.

## 4 DEVELOPING RESEARCH PROPOSALS

### FIRST STEPS IN MEETING THE NEEDS OF YOUR READERSHIP

All recipients will need to be reassured about certain things, which we will address further in Chapter 2, but you will also need to capture their attention early in the proposal form and keep them reading because they will receive a myriad of proposals containing good research ideas from competent people. The world of research is a very competitive environment so one purpose of a proposal is to convince those who have a restricted number of places for research degrees and/or limited financial resources to allocate that your research deserves some special attention. There is some mutuality in this in that your audience too wants to recognise in your proposal that their organisation is receiving some special attention from you – after all you are formulating a proposition that you will work closely with and for them in the future. No one will look fondly at a proposal from an uninterested suitor! So we urge you to start your proposal effort with a little preliminary research about your target readership.

### FINDING OUT ABOUT RESEARCH DEGREE OPPORTUNITIES

In most instances documents related to *research degrees* can be found on institutional websites so you will be able to explore the particular emphases in each institution you are interested in. (This initial interest may be because of location, previous experience of yourself or family/friend, or because of its general reputation, etc. Keep in mind that you may need to spread your net more widely to find the best match with your own needs, attributes and ambitions.) You will see that all are seeking to ensure that every student they accept on a programme of study has a very good chance of success in their study environment; this is in their interest because they want to avoid wasting their time, energy and resources. For instance, they will be seeking students who can provide evidence of having a range of what we might call academic skills, for instance, evidence contained in a curriculum vitae that demonstrates appropriate previous study and experience as well as an application that is written with an appropriately sophisticated attention to style, grammar and spelling. After all, a key aspect of research is dissemination which requires the development of many forms of communication to a high level. We will follow this up in Chapter 3, which will include suggestions for people applying for study using a language that is not the one they most frequently use.

Various combinations of academic qualifications and work experience are deemed acceptable to most HEIs but the exact balance will depend on discipline and the culture of the institution. For instance, in some subject areas, particularly those with a strong professional link such as in education, law or the health professions, it is a positive advantage to have not only work experience

but also a research project stimulated by issues arising in the professional context. In other subject areas, particularly in some rapidly developing science subjects, evidence of recent and relevant academic study in the focal area is essential. All will require a good standard of pass at first degree level, the rubric often referring to a first or upper second class degree or equivalent. The term 'equivalent' indicates that sometimes some professional qualifications or experience may be considered instead so it may be worthwhile, if you are in doubt about the perceived quality of your degree or do not have one, checking with the institution which other qualifications they will consider.

Some institutions have procedures for the accreditation of prior learning (APL) or for the accreditation of prior experience and learning (APEL). This may simply require you to furnish alternative certificates or may be a more demanding process, requiring the development of a portfolio of evidence to support your claims to relevant experience. Other institutions, or specific disciplines within an institution, may also require a master's level degree whilst yet others may accept a master's level qualification as compensating for a mediocre or non-existent first degree. There is some variation within and across HEIs and across HEI systems in different countries because each has different facilities and training/study programmes to bridge the gap between your present level of work and that required for a higher degree by research. Thus it is worth ensuring that you have selected appropriately before spending time on polishing up the rest of your proposal.

## FINDING OUT ABOUT RESEARCH FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

Proposals for *research funding* also require evidence of your academic mastery and prior experience of research to begin the process of judging whether you are a suitable candidate; that is, whether you are likely to have the knowledge and ability to undertake the research proposed. So it is important to check any requirements by funding bodies related to academic experience and success. For example, some HEIs will accept some students on research degrees with one level of academic qualification but require a much higher level from those for whom they are willing to provide their scarce scholarships or bursaries/studentships. Some funding bodies also have funds that are only available to very specific and restricted categories of people, such as particular professional groups (say health workers) or workers within particular organisations (say accredited institutions) or even those with certain personal attributes or backgrounds, depending on the source of the funding and any preference of the person/s providing it. So an extremely important first step in developing this kind of proposal is to check any such limitations in the sources of funding considered. This can usually be found under a heading such as: 'This resource/fund/bid is open to ...'.

## 6 DEVELOPING RESEARCH PROPOSALS

In addition to ensuring that you do not fall at the first hurdle in the reviewing process, a careful examination of information about the organisation or institution will aid your task in other ways, whether you are seeking a place on a research degree or funding or both. Academic reviewers will certainly expect you to have done some exploration about them, what disciplines are taught, what research activity is currently a priority, and so on. Such preliminary research, which you should evidence in the way you write (see Chapter 3), indicates a commonsense approach, some embryonic skill at research and a genuine interest in the institution and those who work in it. They will expect you to be seeking to work in a compatible environment on a topic that is relevant to their current work and available expertise. A wise prospective student will also have familiarised themselves with the work and publications of their potential supervisors (or advisors, as they are called outside the UK) and target their proposal accordingly. You might include evidence of this by including in a covering letter or in your rationale section of the proposal an allusion such as: 'I note that in a recent article by Dr ... that ...'.

### GENERAL PRELIMINARY EXPLORATIONS

Whether you are responding to a call for bids for funding or putting in a speculative proposal, having a knowledge of (and being able to demonstrate) the organisation's recent and relevant research interests similarly indicates efforts to be current in your understanding of and knowledge about the research topic in focus. A further benefit is that you can then target your proposal to fit into a developing area.

One of your first tasks, then, before you set finger to keyboard or pen to paper, is to do some preliminary research about your audience, the institutions or organisations who will be your proposal target and the people who will review your polished effort.

#### ACTIVITY 1 IDENTIFYING THE SKILLS REQUIRED OF A RESEARCHER

Find the website of (one of) the institutions or organisations who will be your proposal target audience. Download relevant documents and begin to prepare a profile description of the kind of researcher they are looking for by sifting through the material for clues. Include the qualifications required but also other important attributes that they seem to value.

For instance, is much made in the documents of the changing nature of the research context of the proposed subject so that 'flexibility' or 'versatility' might be valued? Do they require knowledge, achievements or skills beyond that of a specific subject, such as being able to speak another language, or converse with a wide range of people, or be able to travel

away from base? Demonstrating survival skills when outside of our normal comfort zone may be very important in research that involves fieldwork, whereas the ability to use, or to demonstrate experience of prior use of, particular equipment and /or **instruments** may be valued for lab-based or studio-based research.

## SKILLS INVENTORY

Another early task, one we referred to earlier, is to reassure yourself that you already have some of the skills required to prepare and write a proposal. To complement the activity above we have provided another activity based on ideas and simplified excerpts from the Researcher Development Framework (RDF) that we hope will motivate you to continue learning about the skills and processes involved and will guide you in deciding on which ones, and which parts of this book, need to be prioritised for attention. If you would like to explore the RDF further you can find both the full framework and a resource which is a simple Continuing Professional Development (CPD) tool for researchers, a downloadable Professional Development Planner, on the Vitae website: [www.vitae.ac.uk/rdf](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/rdf)

## ACTIVITY 2 MAPPING SOME OF YOUR RELEVANT SKILLS

In Table 1 are a few of the descriptors in summary form that apply to researchers in general that we have selected to give you an insight into some of the attributes that reviewers will be looking for, or seeking evidence that you might soon achieve, in your proposal. Phase 1 describes research students with a good higher degree while Phase 2 would be more relevant to someone who has or is about to complete their doctoral studies or who is in the first years of employment as a professional researcher. Note that Phase 2 subsumes Phase 1 – it is a development from it. You should not expect to be able to tick all the boxes in Phase 1 if you are applying for a research degree place but you should be able to demonstrate potential for achieving most of them. Whatever your stage of development as a researcher there will be some qualities you may have to work on because none of us is perfect, but we have selected some that are particularly relevant to proposal writing.

Highlight those you feel describe you and note any evidence that you could provide to demonstrate this in the third column. The remaining ones provide you with areas on which you need to work, using this book, the further references listed or other resources.

The relevance of these descriptors will become more evident as you read the next chapter, which provides more detail about the purpose of a proposal from the point of view of those who receive it, describing the sections that you will find in most proposal forms, why they are included and the sorts of things you should therefore include.



TABLE 1 Researcher descriptors

Domain/ sub-domain	Descriptor phase 1	Descriptor phase 2	Potential evidence
Knowledge base/subject knowledge	Knows of recent advances within own research area and in related areas.	Is developing a knowledge of related and associated subject areas.	
Knowledge base/research methods	Understands and can apply relevant research methodologies and techniques and can justify their appropriate application within own research area.	Appreciates the value of, and can apply in appropriate contexts, a range of standards and methods/techniques for information/data collection and analysis.	
Knowledge base/information seeking	Identifies and accesses appropriate bibliographical resources, archives and other sources of relevant information including web-based resources, primary sources and repositories.	Conducts advanced and complex searches using a range of sophisticated information software, resources and techniques; recognises their advantages and limitations.	
Knowledge base/academic literacy and numeracy	Writes clearly and in a style appropriate to purpose and context for specialist and non-specialist audiences.	Improves own style of texts for written or oral presentation.	
	Is mathematically competent to undertake research in own discipline/research area.	Understands any analytical or statistical procedures in related disciplines/research areas and continues to develop mathematical ability.	
	Is IT literate and digitally competent, uses virtual networks for research.	Develops further necessary IT and digital skills.	
Cognitive abilities/analysing and synthesising	Critically analyses and evaluates own findings and those of others. Validates datasets of others.	Has skilled and sharp analytical abilities, with knowledge of a range of methods.	
	Sees connections between sections of own information/data and previous studies.	Critically synthesises new and complex information from diverse sources.	
Cognitive abilities/problem solving	Isolates basic themes of own research; formulates basic research questions and hypotheses.	Has broad vision, recognises patterns and connections beyond own discipline/research area.	
Cognitive abilities/innovation	Understands the role of innovation and creativity in research. May engage in inter-disciplinary research.	Formulates and applies solutions to a range of research problems and effectively analyses and interprets research results.  Exercises critical judgement and thinking to create new and/or imaginative ways of understanding. Develops new ways of working on a topic and has unusual ideas. Identifies which ideas are likely to be successful.	





### **REFLECTION POINT: REFLECTING ON YOUR CURRENT AND REQUIRED SKILLS AND ATTRIBUTES**

You already have many of the skills and attributes required to write a successful research proposal but some will need to be re-orientated to the task, others will need to be polished and a few will need to be acquired. Reflect on which will fit into each category for you and decide on a plan to achieve an acceptable level for each.