Guidance on Preparing a Research Proposal

Introduction

This document explains what Postgraduate Research Applicants should do to maximise their chances of receiving an offer of a place to study. Please note that this guidance is specific to the Department of Civil and Structural Engineering, and does not necessarily reflect the requirements of other Departments at the University of Sheffield.

Minimum Entry Requirements

We generally require:

1. A good undergraduate Honours degree (UK 2:1 or better) or MSc (Merit or Distinction) in a relevant science or engineering subject (please refer to guidance on equivalent qualifications provided by the International Office: http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/international/howtoapply/pgresearch);
2. Evidence of potential to carry out a research study successfully. This may come from any of the following: excellent marks in a substantial research project/dissertation undertaken as part of your UG or PGT course; academic references that clearly demonstrate your strengths as an independent researcher; and/or authorship of academic papers in internationally recognised journals or conferences;
3. An approved English Language Qualification (IELTS 7.0, TOEFL IBT 95, or Pearson PTE 67 (please refer to: http://www.shef.ac.uk/postgraduate/info/englang)).

It is very important to note that meeting the minimum requirements for admission does not guarantee that you will be offered a place to study. There are several other factors that also need to be taken into account, including: whether a supervisor with relevant expertise and supervisory capacity is available; whether the necessary infrastructure (e.g. laboratory space and support) is available; and whether the proposed work fits in with the supervisor’s and the Department’s strategic research objectives. The PhD represents an investment by the student, but there is also a significant investment by the supervisor and the Department (in terms of their time, resources and academic reputation).

Increasing the likelihood of being offered a place

In general, the key to being offered a place is to convince a potential supervisor that you will add value to their current research activities. This involves doing some homework. Use the Departmental website to confirm that academic staff are actively researching the topics that interest you, identify potential supervisors for your project and approach them directly via e-mail prior to making your on-line application. Explain to them what excites you about the possibility of working with them and what interests you particularly about their specific field of research. Suggest to them how you feel your skills/experience will enhance their research. Show that you have read their papers and thought about potential ways in which the research could be developed. It is not necessary to have a fully worked out Research Proposal at this stage; indeed, your intended supervisor may be able to help you prepare a suitable Research Proposal once they’ve been convinced that they wish to support your application.

In some cases you may already have developed a Research Proposal, for example as part of the process of securing funding. If this is the case, you still need to confirm that academic staff are actively researching your topic and to identify potential supervisor(s) for your project. If your proposal relates to a topic that no-one in the Department has any expertise in (e.g. Transport Planning, Construction Management), your application will be rejected. If you have prepared a Research Proposal, but are fairly flexible about the specific details of the research, you should make this very clear to prospective supervisors when contacting them via e-mail and/or in your on-line application. However, you are strongly advised not to say “I’m prepared to do anything with any supervisor”; this doesn’t send out the right messages about your focus or motivation. There is a difference between being flexible/adaptable and being uncommitted and vague.

Useful links:

Departmental research webpages: http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/civil/research
Departmental staff profiles: http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/civil/staff/academic
Departmental PhD Topics list: http://civil.dept.shef.ac.uk/pgr/topics/

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