Applying for a PhD at the School of Law, University of Sheffield
Guide to writing a research proposal

In common with most universities in the UK, at the University of Sheffield we receive a considerable number of PhD applications every year. The following notes have been written with a view to helping prospective students submit high quality applications that are targeted to the research strengths of The School of Law. You are advised to read these notes before submitting your PhD application.

**General**

The application form requires you to provide some standard information about yourself and your past academic performance. Please ensure that this information is correct and that you provide evidence to support your qualifications.

The references that your referees provide are important sources of information for us. Wherever possible, it is helpful if you can to provide a reference from an academic(s) who is(are) aware of your research potential and has(have) read some of your work.

**Choosing a research topic**

Before drafting a research proposal it is a good idea to consult with any academic contacts you already have. Once you have thought about the idea in a bit more detail it may also be helpful to get in contact with any likely prospective supervisors to obtain some feedback.

PhDs are supposed to contain an element of originality and innovation. They also need to be backed up by logically reasoned evidence and argument – whether that is provided by theoretical or empirical sources.
The types of thesis that could be constructed

• An analysis of a specific area of law or criminology on which there is no significant existing literature. The lack of existing literature may be explained by the relative newness of the body of law and/or creation of institutions; or the previous lack of attention given to the practical impact of the chosen area of study. A thesis in this area might attempt to describe, explain and rationalise the development of this particular area of law and/or critically analyse the content of the legal system being researched.

• Identify an area of law or criminology where there is existing literature but empirically study the operation and/or output of that legal process. Such an empirical study would still require a degree of originality but would be academically interesting if it offers a view of the area of study not previously attempted and/or allowed for an appraisal of the effectiveness of the law as it currently stands and is organised.

• An in-depth critical study of a specific aspect of law or criminology. Such an examination may consist solely or mainly of library based or theoretical work, or include an element of socio-legal research. As well as recognising existing literature, such an approach needs to make clear how this project would build on and add to that work. The answer may be that the area of law or criminology has evolved or the work itself takes a very different approach to analysing the problem.
The Research Proposal

Applications must include an outline research proposal. You are therefore asked to give a description of your research project, including the research questions to be addressed, the methodology to be used, the sources to be consulted and a brief timetable. Please provide your outline proposal within the space provided on the application form, or on a separate sheet. If you have more than one topic in mind, please describe both.

There is no set format or page length for proposals. Within your application it is useful to identify and bear in mind some or all of the following points:

**The subject matter of the research** – it is important that you demonstrate clearly the area that you intend to research and provide some indication that you are already knowledgeable in the area that you intend to research. This can be achieved through suitable references and/or by supplying a bibliography to support your application.

**What the main aim(s) of your research will be** – research is about more than collating knowledge already in the public domain. Within your application you should indicate how you intend to add to the knowledge that you will be uncovering. Examples of potential aims include: adding to existing theory; disproving previous understandings; a critique of the current legal position; a defended positive/negative prognosis of the impact of a new legal provision; new empirically obtained findings.

**Why you think the project is worth doing** – a research application is more likely to be accepted if you can demonstrate that it has relevance and academic merit. Ultimately PhD's are awarded where a piece of work can demonstrate some originality and innovation. This should be explained within your application.

**Whether you see any links with previous work** – it is rare for an entirely original piece of research to be written. Therefore, the links with existing research should be made clear, as should the possibilities your work might open up for future research.

**The methodology to be used** – in other words, how do you intend to undertake the research? Methods may include reviewing library based resources or empirical research. If the latter, then what form – eg quantitative or qualitative analysis, and what evidence can you provide that the you have the skills to undertake such research.

**What problems you might encounter** – your application should not be too unrealistic as to what can be delivered. It is also wise to predict the likely challenges that you will face in undertaking the research and suggest ways in which those challenges can be overcome.

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Traps to avoid and positive steps to take
Traps to avoid

Research proposals should not be viewed as binding contracts. Most first year PhD students adapt their research proposal once they start studying the topic in more depth and working with their supervisor. Nevertheless, a PhD proposal should amount to a coherent, intelligent, realistic and relatively well thought-out idea of an area of potential research.

The following errors should be avoided if possible:

• Simplistic descriptions of an area of study should be avoided – eg ‘I want to research EU law’, there must be a focus to the research.
• Offer to review or analyse an area of law on which there is already a significant existing literature. PhDs should be attempting something more than bringing together knowledge that already exists.
• Develop a research proposal primarily because the topic is or has been fashionable. Topics such as the legality of the war in Iraq, the operation of the International Criminal Court or the Human Rights Act remain extremely important areas of academic study, but as a PhD student it is going to be very difficult to say anything interesting, new or original about these topics.
• Avoid trying to resolve grand problems in one thesis. The best research proposals tend to focus on discrete and well-confined subject areas.
• Relying upon a comparison to provide the intellectual component of the proposal, whether that is a comparison between different institutions, different bodies of law or different countries. Comparative research proposals are worthy if properly thought out. If the comparison is between different legal systems for instance, in the submission it needs to be made clear why that comparison could be a useful one and what can be learnt from the comparison. Also it needs to be understood that as the PhD is being submitted in a UK university there needs to be a contribution to UK and/or global knowledge. Further, if the proposal is in essence an analysis of the law in a different country, with only a nominal reference to the law in the UK, it will be unlikely that Sheffield Law School will have the expertise to supervise the thesis.

Positive steps to take

When we make an offer we will do so on the basis of various considerations. Making an effort to foreshadow those considerations in your application is a good idea. Indeed, it is advisable to submit a supporting statement alongside the research proposal. Issues to consider include:

• Why did you choose to apply to the University of Sheffield?
• Can you provide any evidence to suggest that you are (a) capable of completing an extensive piece of research and (b) have the character to undertake three years of study, on a relatively low income and with only supervisory support?
• Does the research proposal fit into one of the areas in which the Law School has a speciality? Often a proposal only needs minor adaptation to fall within an area the School can supervise, but to improve your chances of success it is worthwhile reviewing the academic profile of the various staff in the Law School before you submit an application. For instance, at present we do not have a member of staff with detailed knowledge of Tax Law, hence any applications in this area will automatically be rejected regardless of how worthy the applicant is. A good indication of our staff research interests can be found on the Research Areas Section of our website.
• If you are able, it would be helpful to have a look also at some past PhD theses in your own area of interest which have been successfully submitted at a UK university. (Most UK universities have copies in the library of all past successful PhDs).