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Writing a PhD research proposal

School of Law and Social Sciences

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How PhD proposals are assessed

- **Subject area of the proposal:**
 - does it fit with the subject areas of the School?
 - is there expertise within the School to supervise your research?
- **The nature of the proposed research:**
 - is it viable?
 - Is it achievable within three years?
- **Quality of your ideas:**
 - is there an academic rationale for carrying out the research?
 - is there a 'gap' in knowledge?
 - have you effectively communicated your ideas in the proposal?
 - does the proposal have clear concise aims/objectives which link back to the overall focus of the research?
- **Methodology and Ethics**
 - have you provided a clear rationale for the methodology to be used?
 - have you identified any ethical issues?



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Why does the proposal matter?

- Reflects your initial understanding of the research area
- It needs to make a significant first impression about your potential as a researcher
- It needs to allow us to identify if you are a good match for our supervisors and areas of research
- It needs to demonstrate a high standard of expression in English and your ability to present a well structured and well thought out proposal
- It needs to demonstrate your passion for the subject area



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Essential ingredients for a successful proposal

- **Clear demonstration that:**

you are capable of independent critical thinking and analysis

you are capable of communicating your ideas clearly

you can write in a clear, concise and coherent style

you are able to present and structure your work to a high standard

you write well with excellent expression in English

you have the ability to demonstrate 'ownership' of your subject area



Structure of your proposal

- **1,000 words**
- **Succinct working title clearly outlining the focus of the research**
- **Clear statement about what the research is about and why it is important, interesting, relevant and realistic**

clear research objectives/aims/research questions

what difference will your research project make?

why does this research excite and motivate you?

what 'gaps' in knowledge will your work fill?

is your proposed project achievable in 3 years?



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Structure of your proposal

- **Context/Background knowledge**

demonstrate a good awareness of key literature and debates linked to your area of research

how does your proposal link to existing literature on this subject area?

how will your work support or contest the existing literature in the field?

how does your work relate to the expertise within the School of Law and Social Sciences?



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Structure of your proposal

- **Methodology:**

how will you conduct your research?

will you use existing theories, new methods/approaches or develop new methods/approaches?

how might you design your project to get the best results/findings?

- **Ethics:**

are there any ethical considerations you will need to take into account when conducting your research?



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Structure of your proposal

- **Timetable for your project:**

what will be the major milestones/stages of your research?

what do you expect to achieve at the end of each year of the PhD?

do you envisage any challenges/obstacles to your work plan and if so how will you overcome these problems?

what research skills/work experience do you already have to assist you when undertaking the PhD?

what additional skills do you need to acquire to assist you in completing the PhD?



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Structure of your proposal

- **References/Bibliography (not included in the 1,000 word count)**

provide a list of references to texts/sources discussed in the proposal in the correct Harvard style

provide an additional bibliography listing sources, texts, websites, reports etc. to indicate the availability of a wide range of sources to be consulted for the project

- **Ensure you have followed the guidelines as set out on the LSBU website with regards to PhD applications**



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Methodology and Ethics: What Matters?

School of Law and Social Sciences

Dr Yvonne Robinson
Senior Research Fellow

Dr Elaine Bauer
Senior Research Fellow



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What matters when thinking about methodology?

- **Methodology is an important part of the proposal. It:**

provides a clear indication of how the research will be conducted

needs to communicate a practical methodology which enables the research topic to be addressed and research questions answered

- **You should also consider research design and timescale within your methodology section.**



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Research design

- The research questions you have will shape the way you conduct the research;
- How might you design your project to address research questions, gather data and get the best findings?



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Methods

- You should have a rationale for your choice of methods
- Think about what research methods will allow you to access the material you want to collect?
- Your decision to use particular methods needs to be a logical choice
- Outline 'what' methods you will use and say 'why' you will use them
- Reflect on the practicalities of your proposed research



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Timescale

- **Indicate the strategy and timetable for your research project. For example:**
 - what are the main stages of your project?
 - what will you do in each year of your PhD?
 - what challenges might you encounter and how might you respond to these?

Ethics

- Professional bodies concerned with the social sciences (i.e. ESRC, AHRC) outline ethical issues that can arise while conducting social research
- Within the UK, research involving human subjects is required to be explicit about their ethical guidelines and ethics criteria
- Each university has a Research Ethics Committee which governs key principles set out in their Research Code of Practice outlining ethical guidelines for research
- Ethical issues in research are about respecting the dignity of the people we study, and the integrity of the research we undertake
- Concern the way we treat the people we are researching, and being aware of activities in which we should or should not engage in relations with them
- Also about protecting the researcher during the course of research, and protecting the reputation of the researcher's institution



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Ethical principles

- **The key ethical principles concern:**

avoiding harm to your participants and to researcher

seeking informed consent from your participant

respecting the confidentiality and anonymity of participants

ensuring quality and integrity of your research



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1: Avoiding harm to participants

- Harm to participants may include physical harm, stress, loss of self-esteem, and leading participants to perform wrong deeds.
- Researchers need to avoid situations which can be harmful to participants – this includes avoiding questioning that could be emotionally disturbing for participants.
- Researchers also need to anticipate and avoid situations which could be harmful to themselves. This may sometimes involve ensuring your whereabouts are known to others in the course of conducting research.



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2: Informed consent

- Participants should be given as much information as possible about the research, so that they can make an informed decision about whether or not they wish to take part in the research.
- Such information should include explaining what the research is about, why it is being conducted, who is financing it and if and how it is to be disseminated (i.e. conference/press releases/publications).
- Obtain informed consent from research participants by getting them to sign Consent forms that outline the purposes of the research and other relevant information relating to confidentiality and anonymity.
- The consent form informs the participant that their participation is voluntary; that they have the right to refuse to participate at any stage of the research if they choose for whatever reason; and that they have the right to withdraw the information they supplied.
- It is good practice to have participants sign the consent form before the research begins.



3: Confidentiality and anonymity of participants

- **Confidentiality:** about ensuring the security of the research material such as interviews, questionnaires and visual materials; about data protection.
- **Researchers need to be clear about how they will protect confidentiality of participants' data and other information. Some useful tips include (see Bryman 2008: 120):**

do not store participants' names, addresses or letters of correspondence on hard drives

use identifier codes on data files (interviews etc.) and store the list of participants and their identifier codes separately in a locked cabinet

ensure that transcribers sign a letter stating they will conform to the Data Protection Act (visit university's Data Protection webpage)

ensure participants' names are removed from interview transcripts

keep interview recordings and transcripts in a locked safe



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3: Confidentiality and anonymity of participants

- **Anonymity:** about ensuring that individuals in the research are not identifiable. Some ways of ensuring anonymity include:
 - removing participants' names from interview transcripts;
 - assigning pseudonyms to participants (fictitious naming);
 - altering details such as place names, occupations, and other information that could make participants easily identifiable



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4: Ensuring quality and integrity of your research

This relates to the overall consideration of ethical issues, and the belief that well-designed research which takes all ethical principles into consideration is of high quality and maintains integrity.



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Research Ethics at LSBU (visit the Research Governance page of LSBU website)

- The above are some basic codes of practice by professional associations such as the British Sociological Association and the Economic and Social Research Council
- In addition to these guidelines, most universities have ethics committees that issue guidelines about ethical practice, which are often influenced by the codes developed by the professional associations
- LSBU has its own Research Code of Practice which provides ethical guidelines for all students and staff conducting research on human subjects
- The Research Code of Practice for students embarking on research degrees may be found on the My LSBU website. And information about research ethics may be found on the LSBU Research information / governance webpage
- All research at LSBU involving human participants requires Ethics clearance before conducting research



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Obtaining Research ethics at LSBU

- Postgraduate Research Student projects involving human participants must be approved by the University Research Ethics Committee before research is undertaken.
- Information about the process and application forms can be found on the Ethics webpage.
- In cases involving research with the NHS, you must obtain approval from an NHS Research Ethics Committee before conducting research.
- In preparing your PhD research proposal, it is important to be informed about LSBU's ethical guidelines regarding data protection, confidentiality and intellectual property



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- **Data Protection:**

Data Protection Policy – how data will be stored and accessed. Available on Data Protection webpage•

- **Confidentiality:**

Security of information (i.e. from interviews). Data used for research is dealt with in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998). Available on Data Protection webpage.

- **Intellectual Property:**

About consideration which must be given to protection and exploitation of any Intellectual Property rights derived from research.

These may include:

- Industrial property such as: patents for inventions, trademarks, industrial designs
- Copyright such as: literary works, films, music, art works and architectural designs



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LSBU Research Committee and Research Code of Practice

- Students conducting research with human participants must gain ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee to ensure they conform with the ethical guidelines set out in the LSBU Research Code of Practice before they begin their research.
- For information visit ethics@lsbu.ac.uk.
- Your supervisor will advise you regarding ethics approval for research involving the NHS. Ultimately, For Post-Graduate research projects, each student and their supervisor will determine whether the research requires approval by the University Research Ethics Committee.



Research ethics application

How to submit

- A fully completed Application for Ethical Review of Research Projects Involving Human Subjects (Word 155KB) form. All questions must be answered and it requires to be signed by the Director of Studies for doctoral applications or the Executive Dean (or their representative) for staff applications.
- A full proposal for your study (should be no longer than 12 pages).
- Copies of any questionnaires, indicative interview schedules, recruitment letters or posters etc.
- A Participant Information Sheet (Word 15KB).
- A Participant Consent Form (Word 82KB).
- Permission to access potential participants from gatekeepers.
- A signed copy should be emailed to Research Ethics Committee at ethics@lsbu.ac.uk
- Please note that applications are reviewed on a rolling basis. Applicants should allow four to six weeks before the committee reaches a final decision.
- The approving of Masters' level research and undergraduate research proposals has been devolved to each Faculty whose processes and procedures differ. Please see your supervisor to obtain details of these in relation to your study.