Postgraduate Research Proposals in Humanities

Introduction

The University now requires that postgraduate students present a research proposal between 6 and 12 months of enrolment (for full time students). This should be a serious but not terrifying process. It should be a useful stage in realising a research project, not a mere bureaucratic hoop to jump through.

Students are expected to be able to map a project of MA or PhD scale in an extensive but preliminary manner. They will not be held to the detail of the proposal, but substantial changes of topic will have to be resubmitted as a proposal.

The proposal should be a coherent plan of action rather than a detailed promise of particular results. The plan should provide enough information for the department to be able to judge whether the research project is intellectually feasible, and whether it can be pursued within the resources available.

Structure of a Proposal

The proposal should be presented in written and oral form.

The written form should be a document of 3000 - 6000 words in length (excluding bibliography), and should be available to members of the assessment panel at least a week before the presentation. Students are responsible for providing 4 copies to the postgraduate co-ordinator in their area.

Students may also make copies of the proposal available to other members of the seminar series, if they wish. They could do this either by leaving copies at the cluster office or by email.

The written proposal should have:

1. Title.
2. Topic summary (200 - 400 words).
3. Rationale, including aims and methodology
   — This section should outline what you hope to do, why it is important, and how you intend to proceed with the research. You should outline the gap in the knowledge you intend to fill and address the theory or theories that impinge on your research practice.
4. Provisional chapter breakdown
   — This will normally be very provisional, but should be a genuine attempt to envisage the scale of a thesis for the relevant degree: MA 35 - 50000; PhD 70 - 100000 words.
   A proposal that clearly envisages a thesis that will exceed these limits will be judged to be unsatisfactory.
5. Literature Review
— This is optional, and may not be relevant to all projects in the Humanities. Students should consult with their supervisors about this.

6. Preliminary Bibliography
— This should include references that you have already read and those you intend to read. It should also include an account of any archival resources you intend to use. If there is no formal literature review, it should include a degree of annotation.

7. Provisional timetable
— This will normally be very provisional, but should be a genuine attempt to envisage completion of a thesis within the time available for the relevant degree: MA 2 years; PhD 4 years. It needs to address any fieldwork requirements, and to allot plausible amounts of time to writing up.

8. Indication of special considerations that may be required
— These are likely to be of three kinds:
  1. Equity and health issues.
  2. Funding requirements that go beyond the expectations of traditional library-based research. Where funding is an issue, both student and supervisor will be required to explain where the money is coming from; 'the Faculty should provide' is neither an adequate nor an accurate answer.
  3. Ethics approval, where appropriate.

The oral presentation

The oral presentations will be made in the research seminar series to which the student belongs. They should be targeted to take for 20 minutes initial presentation plus 20 minutes discussion.

The presentation to the research seminar series should take place in a collegial spirit. There is no point going through all this rigmarole if people do not feel free to ask serious questions, but people should also recognise that this is a proposal, not a presentation of finished research. Those chairing proceedings should be aware of their responsibility to protect presenters from questioning based on unreasonable expectations.

The aims of the oral presentation are:
• For the assessors to be able to seek clarification about elements of the project, especially the written proposal.
• For students and staff in the relevant department to provide critical but constructive feedback on the scope and feasibility of the project.
• For all members of the relevant department to learn what particular students are researching so that research networks function properly.
• For presenters to get practice in presenting in an academic forum as independent researchers.

Departments may decide whether presentations should be open to anyone interested in attending, or whether some restrictions should obtain.
Assessment process

The person chairing presentations should ensure that discussion of the proposal be temperate and relevant to the level of progress that a candidate might be expected to have made in 6 - 12 months. Students are producing a proposal for work in progress rather than a finished academic paper, and there will be loose ends.

A panel of four people will sign the assessment report that is sent to the student and the Faculty Higher Degrees Committee. These will normally be:

- The Department's Postgraduate convener
- Both supervisors
- Another member of Flinders academic staff who has relevant expertise and is not a supervisor.

Note:
- Where the postgraduate convener is also a supervisor, another member of staff should be nominated.

The assessment committee can make one of three recommendations:
1. That the proposal be accepted (with whatever feedback the committee members give)
2. That the written proposal only be resubmitted to the assessment committee, with specified modifications, normally within 3 months
3. That the proposal is not satisfactory and will require substantial redesign before a full resubmission, including oral presentation. At that later resubmission, the committee will decide whether the project and candidature should proceed.

Notes:
- Should formal voting ever be needed to reach a decision, a tied vote will mean that the lower recommendation will win out.
- No-one wants to have to use recommendation 3, but it is better that fundamental problems in a research plan be addressed sooner rather than later.
- It is likely that recommendation 2 will be used reasonably often, especially where the scale of the project envisaged is too large. This does not reflect on the capacity of the student, but is merely a sign that some rethinking of the project needs to occur. This is an important part of the educational process, and the feedback should help in developing a strong thesis project

Appeals

If a student is dissatisfied with the assessment of her/his project, and this dissatisfaction cannot be resolved by discussion with supervisors, s/he may appeal the decision.

The student should appeal initially to the Head of the School of Humanities. If the problem cannot be dealt with satisfactorily at that level, the student should appeal to the Faculty Research and Research Higher Degrees Committee.