

# Thesis Proposal Review Meeting Guidelines for Postgraduate Research Students

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## 1. Rationale for the Thesis Proposal Review Meeting

The Thesis Proposal Review is the first major milestone of a candidature, and confirmation of candidature is subject to approval of the thesis proposal. Accordingly, the Thesis Proposal Review Meeting aims to assess Candidates' progress. The Meeting also aims to provide Candidates with an opportunity to discuss their proposed research project with other experts and get feedback from academics with research experience in related fields. Although it has an important monitoring function, the Thesis Proposal Review Meeting is intended to be a supportive and valuable experience for higher degree research students. It should be conducted in a collegial atmosphere where candidates discuss and receive feedback and advice that could help them to improve their proposed research.

## 2. Participants in the Proposal Meeting

1. **Candidate** – research student (PhD, EdD, DSW, MPhil, MEd (Research) degrees).
2. **Proposal Review Committee** –
  - (a) Research Progress Manager, Chair of the meeting (or other member of the Doctoral Division appointed to act as Chair).
  - (b) Members of the supervisory team (Research supervisor, Auxiliary supervisor etc. as relevant).
  - (c) Academic Experts, 2 research active academics from the University (typically from the Faculty) with expertise in the proposed area of study or research approach.

## 3. Roles of the Committee Members

The roles of the Committee Members are as follows:

### Supervisors –

Before the meeting, the supervisor completes the *Request for a Thesis Proposal Review Meeting* (the supervisor's section on the form), in which s/he:

- (a) Nominates 3 Academic Experts;
- (b) Nominates 3 possible meeting dates **agreed** among the nominated Academic Experts, Supervisors and the Candidate.

In the meeting, the supervisor should be supportive of the Candidate, but encourage him/her to show his/her expertise and capabilities by allowing him/her to address critiques, questions or concerns raised by the Committee Members.

### **Academic Experts –**

Before the meeting, the academic experts read and evaluate the proposal (see the section Guidelines for a Thesis Proposal Evaluation below).

In the meeting, the academic experts provide feedback and constructive critique on the proposed research project, including:

- (a) comments on strengths and weaknesses of the proposed research project;
- (b) suggestions for the Candidate on how to improve the project.

### **Research Progress Manager –**

Before and during the meeting, the research progress manager arranges and chairs the meeting (details below).

After the meeting, the research progress manager:

- (a) Writes the Thesis Proposal Review Report (i.e. the Recommendation letter);
- (b) Reviews and approves minor changes (if needed).

## **4. Procedure to Arrange a Thesis Proposal Review Meeting**

1. Prior to arranging the Thesis Proposal Meeting, the supervisor must perform the First Year Integrity Check by examining a Turnitin report for the draft thesis proposal. The supervisor must discuss the results of the report with the student and address any concerns raised before proceeding to arrange the thesis proposal meeting.
2. The Candidate downloads the *Request for a Thesis Proposal Meeting* form from the School's website (see Web address below).
3. The Supervisor, in consultation with the Candidate, completes the *Request for a Thesis Proposal Meeting* Form which requires the supervisor:
  - (a) To nominate three Academic Experts to form part of the Committee. The names of the academics should be prioritised from one (most desirable) to three. Only two are likely to be involved in this process.
  - (b) To propose three possible dates and times for the meeting to occur and coordinate these dates with the nominated Academic Experts, Supervisors and the Candidate.
4. Prior to nominating Academic Experts, the Supervisor should approach them and make sure that:
  - (a) The nominated academics **agree** to be on the Thesis Proposal Review committee;
  - (b) **at least two** of the Academic Experts **are available** for the meeting at any of 3 proposed meeting dates and times indicated in the Form;
  - (c) The earliest meeting date is at least 2 weeks after the planned proposal submission date.

Note: The Research Progress Manager will use the dates and times indicated on the Form to suggest the final meeting date. These dates should be confirmed by the candidate, supervisors and academic experts.

5. The Candidate emails the completed *Request for a Thesis Proposal Meeting* and the thesis proposal (in Word document form) to the Thesis Proposal Manager, A/Prof. Paul Ginns [paul.ginns@sydney.edu.au](mailto:paul.ginns@sydney.edu.au)
6. The Proposal Committee meeting usually occurs within 2 to 3 weeks of receipt of the *Request for a Thesis Proposal Meeting*.
7. The Thesis Proposal Coordinator assigns a Research Progress Manager to arrange and chair the meeting.
8. The Research Progress Manager confirms availability of the Committee Members and arranges the meeting. The Research Progress Manager:
  - (a) books an appropriate room for the meeting;
  - (b) informs all Committee Members about the arrangements for the meeting;
  - (c) distributes copies of the proposal to the Committee Members at least 1 week prior to the meeting.
  - (d) informs the Office of Doctoral Studies about the meeting date for the student's records.

## Procedure for the Thesis Proposal Review Meeting

The meeting usually takes 40 to 60 minutes. The typical procedure is as follows:

1. The Chair welcomes all members, introduces staff unfamiliar to the Candidate.
2. The Chair briefly outlines the purpose of meeting.
3. The Candidate briefly presents the proposed project (approximately 5 minutes, or 30 minutes in cases where the proposal is presented in a public seminar).
4. The members of the Committee ask questions about the proposal, make suggestions and other comments.
5. The Candidate participates in the discussion by responding to the Committee's questions and suggestions.
6. The Chair takes notes of the discussion.
7. After all the Committee Members have had an opportunity to comment, the Candidate is asked to leave the room for 5-10 minutes to allow the Committee to discuss the outcomes of the discussion and formulate the recommendation to the Candidate.
8. The Committee formulates a decision and recommendation to the Candidate including suggestions for strengthening the proposal. Possible decisions include:

### **(a) Approve the proposal**

The thesis proposal is considered to be sufficiently elaborated. The recommendation may include optional suggestions for the Candidate for strengthening the research proposal or/and the final thesis, which the Candidate is at liberty to adopt, or not, in consultation with the Supervisors.

### **(b) Requires minor changes**

The proposal, overall, is considered to be well elaborated and coherent, but requires some clearly identified changes or emendations. The Candidate is required to make the changes by a particular date (usually within 2-4 weeks for full time Candidates), and a revised proposal or sections of the proposal (with changes highlighted) submitted to the Supervisor and Chair of the committee for approval. A document detailing changes made in response to each committee's recommendation should be submitted together with the revised proposal. If needed, the Chair may consult with other Committee Members before approving the revisions. The Committee will not reconvene in this instance.

**(c) Requires major changes**

The proposal, overall, is considered to be sufficiently elaborated and generally coherent, but requires some changes or emendations that may significantly affect the overall design of the study (e.g., changes of research questions, theoretical framework, methodological design, and research instruments). The Candidate is required to make the changes by a particular date (usually within 4-6 weeks for full time Candidates), and a revised proposal or sections of the proposal (with changes highlighted) submitted to the Committee for approval. A document detailing changes made in response to each committee's recommendation should be submitted together with the revised proposal to the Chair of the Committee. The Committee will review changes made by email and decide whether or not a further meeting is required.

**(d) Requires revision**

The research project is considered to need major revision or elaboration. The Candidate is required to address the committee's recommendations and detail how they have followed advice of the Committee by a particular date (up to 10 weeks for full time Candidates). The Committee will reconvene to discuss the proposal after the changes have been made. If a Candidate's proposal is not acceptable (i.e., "Approved" or "Minor Changes") after a second committee meeting, the Candidate may be required to show good cause as to why their candidature should be continued. The revised proposal and the document detailing changes made should be submitted to the Office of Doctoral Studies following the procedures outlined in Section 4 (Procedure to Arrange a Thesis Proposal Review Meeting).

9. The Candidate returns to the meeting and is informed orally of the Committee's deliberations.
10. The Committee provides a written report (i.e., a recommendation letter) to the Candidate within 2 weeks after the meeting.
11. If there is contention with the decision made regarding the decision and/or recommendations provided, then the candidate can approach the Thesis Proposal Manager or the HDR Coordinator if the Thesis Proposal Coordinator was the Chair of the meeting.

## 5. Recommendation letter

1. After the meeting, the Chair of the Committee drafts the initial recommendation letter to the Candidate that includes the following:
  - (a) Names of the committee members
  - (b) Date of the committee's meeting
  - (c) Decision of the committee
  - (d) Required changes (if any)
  - (e) Additional advice (if any)
  - (f) Date for completion of changes and/or resubmission (if needed)
2. The Chair forwards a draft copy of the letter to the Committee Members for their confirmation.
3. On confirmation of its contents and accuracy by all Committee Members, the Chair provides the letter to the Candidate, the Committee Members and the Office of Doctoral Studies.
4. If the Committee decides that the proposal *requires minor or major changes*, the Chair of the Committee should also write the final approval letter after the changes are approved.
5. All related documents, e.g., initial proposal, revised proposal if applicable and letters need to be added to the Candidate's file.

## 6. Procedures for transferring from the Master of Philosophy (MPhil) to the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

An MPhil candidate may apply for a transfer to the PhD.

1. Request for the transfer to a PhD degree should take place at the end of the first year of candidature.
2. The Candidate and Supervisors should request a Thesis Proposal Meeting following the guidelines outlined above, with the emendations as outlined below.
3. The Candidate is required to provide a PhD thesis proposal, which contains the equivalent of two fully developed draft chapters of the thesis (such as the literature review and theoretical framework and research methodology chapters) in addition to other sections of the proposal (approximately 20,000 words in total), for the Committee Members to evaluate the Candidate's potential and capacity to complete a PhD degree.
4. In the case that the Candidate has already had a Thesis Proposal Meeting, the Candidate is required to provide:
  - (a) A document explaining and justifying the differences between the approved MPhil and current PhD proposals.
  - (b) Two satisfactory draft chapters (for example, the Literature Review and Research Methodology chapters; approximately 20,000 words in total).
5. The transfer meeting proceeds in the same manner as the Thesis Proposal Meeting. In addition to the Committee's recommendation on the Thesis Proposal, the Committee

makes a recommendation on the request to transfer to the PhD. The outcomes could be:

- (a) The committee supports the transfer to the PhD; or
- (b) The committee recommends continuation of the MPhil. In the event that the transfer to PhD is not approved, the committee may recommend changes to be completed before approval of the MPhil (to be approved either by circulation or through reconvening of the committee).

**Note:** Students who wish to transfer between research degrees (other than from the MPhil to the PhD) must apply for admission to a new degree. Their application will be considered if they meet the admission requirements for the new degree only. If they are offered a place, the time spent in the previous degree could be credited towards the new degree. In such cases, not more than 50% of the time required for the new degree can be credited.

## 7. Guidelines for a Thesis Proposal

### Proposal Lengths<sup>1</sup>

PhD proposal: ~ 8,000 – 10,000 words

Doctor of Education proposal: ~ 8,000 – 10,000 words

Doctor of Social Work proposal: ~ 5,000 – 6,000 words

MPhil proposal: ~ 3,000 – 4,000 words

MEd (Research) proposal: ~ 2,000 – 2,500 words

### Guidelines for a thesis proposal evaluation

1. A clearly focussed statement of the overall purpose of the proposed research<sup>2</sup>.
2. A clearly focussed research question/hypothesis that is:
  - (a) worth asking;
  - (b) capable of being answered.
3. Precise definitions of the key terms in the research question(s) or hypothesis(es) that will allow them to be clearly observed, measured and identified throughout the study.
4. A statement which illustrates why the study is significant; that is, why the research question or hypothesis is worth asking.
5. A critical synthesis of key research which has already been carried out in the particular area including:
  - (a) what conclusions were reached in this previous research, by whom and when;

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<sup>1</sup> The word length for proposals excludes references and appendices.

<sup>2</sup> For further guidance, see Paltridge, B. and Starfield, S. (2007). *Thesis and Dissertation Writing in a Second Language*. London: Routledge Falmer.



- (b) consideration of the findings of previous research in the light of the methods and theoretical frameworks used;
  - (c) whether these conclusions are in agreement or conflict with each other;
  - (d) the main issues or controversies which surround the problem;
  - (e) significant gaps in previous research in this particular area;
  - (f) a clear and specific explanation of how the previous research is relevant to the proposed study.
6. A well-justified choice of research design, carefully matched to the specific research question. Detail about research procedures should be given in sufficient detail to allow assessment of the viability of the project, and the capacity of the research procedures to generate trustworthy answers to the research questions. The proposal should explain the method of data collection and analysis, and should also include, if appropriate:
- (a) an explanation and justification of the theoretical or methodological framework to be used in the analysis;
  - (b) an explanation and justification of which participants/materials will form the data for the study and how these will be selected;
  - (c) a pilot study in which the research instruments will be trialled and evaluated and an analysis is carried out of the trial data.
7. The methodology section should also discuss:
- (a) any anticipated problems and limitations in the proposed study including threats to reliability and validity and how these will be countered;
  - (b) ethical issues involved in carrying out the research such as whether informed consent needs to be obtained, and if so, how this will be done;
  - (c) the proposed timetable for the research. This should give a clear indication as to how realistic the proposal actually is;
  - (d) a proposed budget for the research (if appropriate). This should give an indication of how realistic the proposal may be in terms of financial requirements and whether the research might need to be adapted in the light of these.
8. A complete list of references consistently formatted.
9. Appendices (if appropriate) which contain materials that will be used or adapted for the study, including research instruments and permissions that might need to be obtained to use them.

### **Suggested structure of the research proposal**

#### **The proposal might be based on the following headings:**

1. Title of the proposed study
2. Introduction
3. Significance and background of the proposed study
4. Literature review and theoretical framework
5. Research question/s or hypotheses

6. Research methodology, including ethical considerations, resources required, anticipated problems and limitations, and timetable
7. Bibliography
8. Appendices (as relevant).

N.B. The above structure is provided as a guideline only. Particular research projects may warrant variation from the above structure. These suggested headings may be varied to suit different types of intended theses, for example, thesis by publication<sup>3</sup>.

## **8. Related resources**

Request for a Thesis Proposal Review Meeting form:

[http://www.edsw.usyd.edu.au/current\\_students/assistance\\_forms/forms/rhd\\_students.shtml](http://www.edsw.usyd.edu.au/current_students/assistance_forms/forms/rhd_students.shtml)

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<sup>3</sup> For more information see *Thesis and Examination of Higher Degrees by Research Policy 2015* at <http://sydney.edu.au/policies/showdoc.aspx?recnum=PDOC2014/374&RendNum=0>