**GUIDE TO DEVELOPING AN**

**MA THESIS/DISSERTATION PROPOSAL**

The Research Committee recommends that you read this guide before completing your MA ‘Expression of Interest’ research proposal to avoid being asked to revise it following the committee’s assessment. The guide follows the structure of the application form, offering tips on how to best answer each section. If you need further assistance, please talk to your MA advisor or someone who you think might be a potential supervisor.

**SECTION B: PROVISIONAL RESEARCH DETAILS**

**PROVISIONAL TOPIC & TITLE OF THESIS**

Please indicate the title of your thesis and, if this does not fully indicate the general topic of research, then please take a couple of lines to briefly indicate what this will be.

**INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND**

Here you should situate your research topic in the broader empirical and theoretical literature. This could include:

* Indicating how other scholars have approached your topic, noting any dominant theories/perspectives/methods and how your research will build upon/test them
* Identifying a key gap in the literature, which scholars have not considered (or have done so incompletely)

This section should close with a statement that indicates exactly what you are interested in, and how it fits with, or relates to, the work of other scholars. You should introduce any key concepts that you will be using in your research if they emerge from the literature.

Please note it is expected you will provide *references* to the work of other scholars you mention here and in other sections of the proposal, providing a reference list at the end.

**AIMS OF RESEARCH**

**What question(s) or problem is your research seeking to answer?**

Ideally, this will take the form of a succinct question. For example:

* “What are the social and economic implications of the National government’s recent ‘workfare’ welfare reforms?”
* “Does Bourdeiu’s concept of ‘habitus’ explain the academic experiences and outcomes of secondary school students in New Zealand?”
* “Is the presence of graffiti in a neighbourhood related to serious crime?”
* “How is the ontological distinction between reform and revolution restricting systemic social change?”

To develop a research question, you need to be specific about concepts or variables you are interested in, be clear in defining them and have a sense of how you will measure or test them. As such, you may need to include sub-questions to explain how you will tap into various parts of your broader question or the different variables associated with it. For instance, in regards to: “Is the presence of graffiti in a neighbourhood related to serious crime?” you could have sub-questions such as:

* How is ‘serious crime’ defined in the New Zealand criminal justice context?
* What is ‘graffiti’ and why might we assume it may be associated with serious crime?
* What other factors may increase or reduce serious crime and how can we separate out the impact of ‘graffiti’ from these?

You need to think about whether your questions can actually be answered, particularly given time and methodological constraints!

**Why do you think this project is worth doing?**

This is where you get to provide the academic/policy/social justice/other rationales for your research. Using the example of the National government’s ‘workfare’ reforms we could say:

1. Scholars are still debating the citizenship implications of benefit recipients being subject to obligations that are not placed upon other citizens. So, there is continuing academic interest in this problem

[ACADEMIC RATIONALE]

(b) Closely related to (a), scholars continue to offer conflicting accounts of whether ‘workfare’ is successful in actually improving employment outcomes. So, this study will seek to offer further empirical work that could help resolve our understanding of the problem

[ANOTHER ACADEMIC RATIONALE]

(c) Given governments spend a lot of time and money monitoring whether benefit recipients have met their obligations, ‘workfare’ policies may waste public resources if they are unsuccessful and other policy solutions to unemployment may have been ignored

[POLICY RATIONALE]

(d) ‘Workfare’ frames benefit recipients as undeserving and as ‘bad citizens’, stigmatising them as individuals. If the idea that workfare improves employment outcomes is unfounded, this offers opportunities for reorienting how we frame this group of people

[SOCIAL JUSTICE RATIONALE]

**METHODOLOGY**

**What kind of data will be required?**

Here you need to think about what kind of data would actually measure your concepts/variables, so you know when you have answered your research question/s.

For the question relating to Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, you would most likely need some quantitative data about secondary school students (for instance, about their socio-economic status, family background, gender, ethnicity). But you likely also need qualitative data from interviews or focus groups with students, their parents or teachers to be able to get a sense of their broader lifestyles, values, dispositions and expectations.

Not all theses and dissertations will involve empirical fieldwork but, even in more theoretically-oriented studies, it is important to think about what particular scholarly works or scholars you will draw upon and whether, to answer your question, you need to apply their ideas to a particular case to see how useful they are – in that situation, you might also need to draw upon media reports, policy documents and even qualitative interview data.

For instance, our question relating to the ontological distinction between reform and revolution clearly requires an indepth analysis of the views of key theorists in this area but it might also be useful to draw upon a case study of a particular country or social movement where these theoretical ideas can be teased out.

**What major methods or procedures will be used to collect and analyse the data?**

You need to identify specific research methods and analysis strategies here. Some specific methods might include:

(a) Interviews/focus groups

(b) Content analysis

(c) Discourse analysis

(d) Policy analysis

(e) Unobtrusive observations

(f) Use of existing statistics

(g) A case study

(h) A survey

Once you have identified specific methods, you should say how you will use them. In our graffiti example, you might rely on unobtrusive observations to survey the volume of graffiti in a neighbourhood and existing police statistics for the serious crime rates, while in the reform versus revolution example you might use discourse analysis to examine how a particular social movement frames itself in regards to the desirability or necessity of systemic change.

In terms of analysis of data, you should identify the general approach taken (for instance, you may wish to undertake a thematic analysis of interview data or apply particular statistical analyses to survey data). You might also include the specific questions that will be asked of the data, and how the data will be categorised to address them. In our graffiti example we might ask:

(a) In neighborhoods with more graffiti, is there a high serious crime rate?

(b) In neighborhoods with less graffiti, is there a low serious crime rate?

(c) Do we find some neighborhoods with low graffiti, some with high graffiti, and similar crime rates?

(d) Do we find neighborhoods with similar levels of graffiti, but different serious crime rates?

To answer these questions, we might categorise our neighborhoods by level of graffiti in terms of “low graffiti neighbourhood,” “moderate graffiti neighbourhood,” and “high graffiti neighbourhood.” We could create a similar categorisation system for serious crime rates (i.e., “low level of serious crime,” “moderate level of serious crime,” and “high serious crime rate.”)

We understand that, at this stage in your study, it is unlikely you will be unable to map out everything you will do but you need to have some kind of plan so we can assess the feasibility of the proposal.

**Who are the proposed research participants (if any)?**

If you plan to conduct any study with human participants, you must gain approval from the university’s ethics committee and it can take several weeks/months to develop the application and receive approval. We would generally discourage dissertation students from undertaking such a project because there is simply not enough time and thesis students may also want to consider how gaining such approval will impinge upon their planned timetable. This is especially important if you wish to research a ‘vulnerable’ population (such as children) or where there are cultural issues which must be addressed.

If you *do* plan to involve human participants, you should be specific as possible as to who these are likely to be. In our example of National’s ‘workfare’ reforms, you might interview benefit recipients who are consenting adults over 18 and have been on Job Seeker Support for at least one year and who live in the Auckland region.

You should also indicate the approximate number of participants, keeping in mind the time and size restrictions of MA research.

**POSSIBLE SUPERVISOR (Please remember that the Research Committee is tasked with assigning supervisors)**

If you have someone in mind, name them here! If you don’t, the Research Committee will ensure the best available person suited to your topic is selected.

Note that academic staff on sabbatical are not supposed to supervise MA students during their leave and, in general, no staff member should supervise more than two students at one time.