# Guidelines and criteria for drafting a PhD proposal

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1. Why a PhD proposal?

A PhD proposal with a well-defined research question, a clear structure and a well-described methodology, can be a useful aid in further developing the research, as well as an important time-saver. The faculty, through the doctoral program and recommendations from the doctoral committee, aims to play a supportive, coaching role in the development of the proposal.

The faculty does not want to take the position of supervisors and co-supervisors, but merely to support in and contribute to the smooth proceeding of the research project, in the interest of the researcher.

In implementation of Art. 10 § 3 of the faculty’s doctoral regulations the doctoral committee clarifies, in this document, the criteria on which its assessment of the research proposal is based. This document also offers some substantive suggestions about the doctoral proposal.

2. The criteria used by the doctoral committee

The committee employs following criteria in reaching its conclusions. Depending on the nature of the project, the relative weight of those criteria may vary.

2.1 General criteria

- The scientific originality of the project:
  - The proposal must not limit itself to a purely descriptive overview of sources or empirical data. It has to show the own contribution of the candidate in assessing and analysing the main research question and/or the sources and empirical data. Such contribution may take a variety of forms:
    - The contribution can be original from a contents point of view, which would require both contextualisation [providing a wider context for the topic], and conceptualisation [linking the topic to existing concepts, or suggesting the paths along which new concepts will be developed]. If the research is more empirically oriented, originality from a contents point of view would mean providing a wider context to the data, and explaining how they may provide the kick-off for new theories, concepts, insights or research methods.
    - Structural originality entails the internal organisation of the research project and its structure, as well as the degree to which these two former elements may enhance the accessibility and comprehension of the sources and/or of the empirical data.
- The own contribution is meant to provide depth to the research. This requires the research questions to be thoroughly pondered, using sound arguments, which will allow the researcher to reach his /her conclusions in a scientifically sound manner.
- When reviewing the scientific originality of the project, the Committee will take account of the relevance of the research project within its research domain, and the degree to which the proposed research goes beyond the state of the art in the area.

- The **thoroughness** of the project:
  - The criterion ‘thoroughness’ reviews the degree to which the proposal’s approach is likely completely to answer the research question, and whether it is supported by the relevant sources and /or empirical data.
  - The proposal is complete when all relevant aspects of the research question have been assessed.
  - As far as the sources are concerned, it is not the exhaustiveness of the suggested sources which is most relevant, but rather the degree to which the relevant sources are truly incorporated into the research proposal.

- The **cross boundary character** of the project:
  - Crossing boundaries may firstly entail a comparison of cases (judicial systems, States, organisations, periods in time etc). The comparison needs to be substantial, and real, meaning a simple descriptive comparison or juxtaposition is not sufficient;
  - One can however also cross boundaries by the interdisciplinary nature of the proposal. This would require the researcher to employ a variety of disciplines so as to reach a systematic comparison and /or integration of these disciplines.

### 2.2 Specific criteria
- With respect to **methodology** (background and context, research questions, research methods, planning):
  - The research method has to be of such clarity of purpose that others can repeat it, and as the case may be, can improve upon it or criticise it (intersubjectivity);
  - The research method has to be the right means to answer the research question(s), taking into account potential alternative methods (adequacy of the research method);
  - The retained method has to lead to correct results, and clear and manageable insight (accuracy of the research question);
  - The proposed research method must be feasible within the proposed time frame.
- With respect to the doctoral researcher:
  - The research ability and research potential of the candidate, taking into consideration the research topic and the proposed methodology, will be assessed.
3. Some suggestions for writing a PhD proposal

3.1 General

- A PhD proposal is *sui generis*; it is unlike any other form of writing. It aims at setting out a clear picture of what will be researched and how. Hence the PhD proposal does have to take the form of a publishable short paper.
- The proposal’s title is not a working title, but ought to cover the research contents. The title has to be well thought through, as the titles of PhD proposals which have been approved by the Faculty, are published. Publication of titles of PhD research is aimed at enabling researchers of K.U. Leuven and elsewhere to assess the aim and scope of current research, with a view to assessing who is occupying a given field of research.
- Footnotes may add value when chosen carefully and used selectively. Hence cautious use of footnotes is encouraged however they are not a necessity.
- The PhD proposal proper must not exceed 6000 words (including footnotes but excluding bibliography, and table of contents: see below).

3.2 Substantive suggestions

While the doctoral committee wants to respect the autonomy of the doctoral researcher and supervisor, it is also often confronted with requests for help and coaching on writing a good proposal. What follows is an attempt to reconcile both opposing goals.

These substantive suggestions should be seen as suggestions to assist the researcher, and they are in no way binding directives. For example, one might decide to depart from them for epistemological reasons.

These suggestions are organised by various headings, thus presenting some typical parts of a research proposal. Yet, this classification is by no means mandatory. Other formats are possible, both for substantive reasons or, for example, because of the requirements of a grant application.

3.2.1 Aims and objectives

This section describes the problem which is the starting point for the research, and answers *inter alia* the following questions:

- What are the research objectives?
- How does the research project add value to the legal or criminological knowledge and how does it go beyond the *status quaestionis*?
- Is there any added value for legal or criminological practice?

3.2.2 Research questions or research hypotheses

Usually, a proposal identifies the *research question(s)* which the research aims to answer.
These questions need to be formulated with great care and precision, and they ought to be limited in number (they may entail a number of sub-questions). Research questions may sometimes also be formulated as research hypotheses (see examples below).

It is paramount to distinguish between on the one hand normative questions and hypotheses (what the situation ought to be), and on the other hand empirical questions and hypotheses (what is the situation and how can one explain it).

**Normative research questions and hypotheses** typical for (although not exclusive to) legal research. When answering this type of questions, it is crucial for one to highlight the normative criteria which will guide one’s assessment, so as to justify one’s eventual answer and put it into context.

- Example of a normative research question: *Which is the most transparent way of rolling out the principle of equal treatment in the relations between employers and employees?*

Where the issue has already attracted substantial literature or where one already has an inkling as to what the answer should be, the normative research question may be further refined and reformulated as a research hypothesis. In such instance the research will focus on whether the research hypothesis, against the background of clearly identified criteria, is correct.

- Example of a normative research hypothesis: *Rolling out the principle of equal treatment in the relations between employers and employees by a positive translation of the principle (as opposed to a negative translation, such as the prohibition of non-discrimination), leads to a more transparent law of equal treatment.*

The presence of normative respectively empirical research questions and research hypotheses, has a major impact on the conceptual build-up of the research. However this does not exclude them from occurring concurrently in the same research. On the contrary, their joint presence may add value to the research. For instance, one could subject empirical research questions to a normative examination prior to testing them through empirical research. Conversely, empirical research may help provide a better formulated answer to a normative research question. It is paramount however, in the event of a combination of both types of research question, to distinguish them clearly.

For reasons of philosophy of science or otherwise, a PhD candidate may choose to ignore the distinction made above, or may opt to formulate research questions in a more general sense.

### 3.2.3 Research design

Typically, a PhD proposal describes the research methods that will be used to answer the research question. In the social sciences one often speaks of ‘research design’ in this context. The choice for a specific research method and any options made within this method, need to be justified. For instance the candidate needs to identify the primary sources for the research, and why these ought to be the primary sources. One could think e.g. of a method which relies on case-law from the higher courts of the land only, or for instance the case-law at State level only in a federal society. For social sciences one
could already indicate, for instance, how the sample will be compiled for the (qualitative or quantitative) empirical research.

With respect to the employed research methods, it would seem advisable to distinguish between social sciences and legal research.

With the **scientific tradition of the social sciences**, one typically distinguishes between the quantitative approach (which uses surveys e.g.) and the qualitative approach (using e.g. open interviews of participative observation). Increasingly these 2 methods are combined. For instance one could opt to study a limited number of cases (e.g. organisations) and additionally employ one survey within each case. One could also opt to conduct both methods consecutively, e.g. one could conduct an initial qualitative research so as to formulate hypotheses which subsequently are tested in quantitative research. Finally, one could also select methods which lie in between qualitative and quantitative methods, such as Qualitative Comparative Analysis.

The PhD Committee is not in the business of excluding any research method and hence is open to a wide array of approaches: experimental research, surveys, case-studies, interpretative approach, phenomenological research, grounded theory, ethnography etc.

Whichever method one opts for, it is essential for the candidate to justify the choice in particular by showing how the chosen method is suited to respond to the research question. Moreover where empirical research is used, the candidate has to show its quality will be ensured (via criteria such as reliability or validity, or other, as the case may be). Finally where any research method requires technical capacities, the candidate ought to show whether one already possesses these capacities and in the negative how one suggests going about acquiring these.

With respect to **legal studies** one could ponder the idea historical method (whereby one does not make abstraction of the historical and cultural context in which a given legal solution arises), the legal history method, law and economics, and the comparative approach. Most relevant methods have received abundant attention in legal doctrine, and applicants are encouraged to consult some core doctrine.

The doctoral committee does not wish to raise the impression that comparative analysis necessarily ought to be preferred over and above other methods of legal research. However an increasing amount of applications does refer to this method, hence it would seem appropriate to comment on some of its core issues.

- Any comparative method must be integrated. One cannot suffice with a mere juxtaposition of the various elements of the comparison. The research starts with a research question that clarifies what is aimed for and how an answer will be developed. It may be useful to consider similarities rather than differences in order to focus the research design and the research question.
- It is important to clarify and justify the choice of the legal systems, time frames, etc. that will be compared. The elements of the comparison must be adequate in the light of the research questions and hypotheses. The sampling should also take into account the practical feasibility of the proposed comparison. For example, when a researcher does
Criminological research can not only take a social science or legal perspective, but also a historical or ethical-philosophical point-of-view. Whichever approach you choose, it is important to demonstrate the relevance of criminological research. In case auxiliary sciences are used, make sure to meet the quality standards of the respective auxiliary science(s).

Finally, subject to due justification, one may certainly opt to develop the methodology in a different fashion as suggested here, for instance because of reasons of philosophy of science.

Finally the committee welcomes criminological research which is not of a social-scientific nature but rather, for instance, historic or ethical /philosophical. In such case one has to show the criminological relevance of the research as well as how one abides by the quality standards of whichever scientific discipline one aims to employ.

### 3.2.4 Structure of the research project

This section clarifies the structure and the reporting of the research. Discuss the consecutive steps of the analysis/research and highlight how you will report the results. As for the latter, this more or less corresponds to a review of your proposed table of contents.

The structure of the research project can be proposed in different ways, which can be combined.

- One can develop a conceptual framework containing the central concepts of the study and their connection. This conceptual framework can consist of empirical hypotheses that will be tested or further developed via empirical research. It can also be a normative framework in which criteria should be clarified that can be used to test and/or to justify normative statements.
- One can also outline the various analytical components of the research proposal. This can be in the form of a concrete action plan that will be completed in the study. It can also take the form of a presentation of the expected components of the final thesis (a table of contents with clarification).

### 3.2.5 Planning

It is advisable to include an initial timetable for the various parts of the research project. This will allow for an assessment of the feasibility of the proposal.