

**GLOBAL
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Edinburgh Napier
UNIVERSITY

MBA

Master of Business Administration

**RESEARCH
SKILLS FOR
MANAGERS**

**Research
Proposal
Guidelines**

MBA - RESEARCH PROPOSAL GUIDELINES

Throughout this module you have been exposed to a range of research skills and have been working towards developing a research topic appropriate to the requirements of MBA study. Your outline research template was an opportunity to showcase your thinking and assisted us in allocating an appropriate academic supervisor.

The research proposal (which accounts for 100% of the mark for the module) is a more robust piece of work giving further details of your research topic. There will be a fine-tuning of the aims and objectives set out in your outline research template, with a more substantial literature and methodology, as well as an indication of a feasible planning horizon. You will use the contents of your proposal as the starting point for your research project and this will be further developed and enhanced in your MBA Project.

You should be drawing on material from within this Research Skills for Managers module to write your proposal, with your supervisor facilitating and supporting you in the specific academic area, as appropriate. Ultimately, however, this is an individual piece of work and you will be working independently to produce your research proposal.

Remember also that this is an **ACADEMIC** piece of research based on subject disciplines which may have been part of your MBA programme or that you have studied to sufficient depth prior to embarking upon the programme. As a current or future manager, there is an expectation that your proposed research will have the potential to impact on some area of business and management allied to your current or future employment.

It is worth re-iterating that the research detailed in your proposal should **NOT** be a work-based or consultancy project and it must be firmly grounded within the functional areas of business, drawing upon relevant literature associated with that topic area. Typically, your research question(s) should be positioned in the context of frameworks and models that currently exist within the academic and practitioner literature – your proposal should incorporate these.

The grading sheet and grading criteria (pages 8 & 9 refer) will be used to assess your proposal, each section being individually graded and with a final grade reflecting the weightings for each of these sections. To achieve a pass you must achieve an **overall** grade of P1 or above. You will not be able to progress to the MBA Project until you successfully complete this Research Skills for Managers module.

RESEARCH PROPOSAL DEVELOPMENTS

Your research proposal will provide the basis for undertaking your MBA research project and should clearly and concisely set out the key elements of your proposed research. At this stage, it should provide appropriate evidence of the area(s) of business and management that you are intending to investigate and the questions you are posing – there should be reference to the literature relating to relevant academic theory, appropriate frameworks and/or models, the proposed methodological stance and data collection techniques you intend to deploy.

Note also that you are not required to undertake any actual primary data collection at this stage – the proposal merely indicates what you are **intending** to do.

In writing your research proposal, you should adhere to the structure detailed in these guidelines upon which the assessment criteria are based. Exemplars of research proposals are given on Moodle as well as an example research proposal with tutor commentary.

A further online resource is the Dissertation Maze. This is an excellent resource developed by Dr Colin MacKenzie and it will help you to get started with your research study. To access this use the url: <https://open.napier.ac.uk/login/>. Select "The Dissertation Maze – Postgraduate – the enrolment key is: edinburghnapiermazepg.

The **maximum** word count for the research proposal is **4000** words. Word limits for each section are not given explicitly – each proposal will, after all, be different. As a rough guide, the weighting given to each section provides an indication of its relative importance, so this may govern the number of words that you allocate to each of these sections. Ultimately, however, your proposal is judged on whether it presents a focussed area of research, with clear aims and objectives, relevant literature and appropriate methods for data collection.

Please note that if your word count is not within $\pm 10\%$, that penalties will apply.

RESEARCH PROPOSAL STRUCTURE

Introduction

In this section, you will contextualise the rationale for your proposed research. For example, you should include:

- Your particular background, inspiration and motivation for the proposed research;
- The practitioner or work-based context that leads you to examine this topic;
- The functional areas of business which you are drawing upon;
- Academic literature (including supporting references) which you are using to illustrate the academic underpinning of the research;
- Why this research project is potentially important – you could perhaps refer to how it might assist industry, organisations or practitioners;
- How innovative the research could be e.g. using existing published research but in a different context.

Not all of these may be appropriate but the majority should be. In essence, this section should allow the reader to clearly identify the academic arena in which the research is located and its potential to 'fill a gap' that exists within this area of business and management.

Aim and objectives

This section should include a very clear statement of the overall aim of the research, leading on from the introduction.

Typically, you will have three or four specific objectives which will enable you to achieve your main aim. It is likely that these will incorporate an academic element (perhaps 'testing' a hypothesis or basing your research/analysis on an existing framework/theory) and a practical perspective (possibly leading to recommendations) relating to the workplace/sector/industry. The balance between the two is dependent on the research topic selected, but the academic focus must be visible at this stage. The objectives should flow in a logical fashion and your first objective is typically a review of the appropriate academic and practitioner (as appropriate) literature.

A brief justification of why these aims and objectives are appropriate is also useful to highlight the focus of your proposal. Formulating clear and well-defined objectives shows clarity of

thought and will help you remain focussed throughout the research process. It is suggested that you review Unit 1 and your outline research template when writing this section of the proposal.

Identification and initial review of key literature

Unit 2 is your point of reference here. This will help you to create an overview of the basic literature in your outline research template. Since then, you will have gathered [and recorded via your database(s)] a body of literature that will need reviewing and a degree of selectivity is now essential.

As a guide, a **minimum** of twelve key/seminal literature sources should be cited that you believe inform your proposed research. As stipulated in Unit 2, these sources should incorporate journal articles, textbooks, practitioner-based/trade press articles, industry/organisation reports, (quality) news media articles and/or relevant and **credible** websites.

When writing this section, compare and contrast the literature (as you will eventually do in the main project/dissertation) using the APA 6th referencing style and ensure there is continuity and a logical link between the references and themes introduced. References of the cited authors would then appear in the 'References' section towards the end of your proposal.

Ultimately, the literature review should lead the reader to the core question/aim to be addressed, as outlined in the previous section of the proposal.

Research approach

In this section, you should allude to the methodology, design, methods and analysis to be deployed in your research. The research process model is a good benchmark here. Units 3, 4, 6-9 may all have elements of relevance, but particularly the exercises within these units.

Being realistic, although you should have a fairly clear view of the methodology and design (possibly influenced by access arrangements) aspects of your proposed research, you may not have a definitive vision of the methods and analysis that you will use. At this stage you should indicate the approach that seems **most appropriate** with your chosen topic and consistent with the methodology and design – if it changes later on once you have started your main project/dissertation research that will be reflected in the assessment of your MBA project module.

Some of the questions you might address here are:

- What is your overarching methodological stance?
- How does this relate to a deductive or inductive approach?
- In terms of design, are you going to use a *case study* of a particular organisation or a smaller number of organisations or will you carry out a survey of a large number of organisations in an industry?
- Are you using one method or mixed methods - why have you chosen the selected research method(s)?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of your research method(s)?
- If you are using only secondary data, can you be sure of its integrity, validity and currency in relation to your research?
- How are you going to analyse the data you have assembled/collected?

These questions are indicative, but there is an expectation that throughout your discussion it should be supported by references to appropriate business research texts for example Saunders *et al.*, (2015) and Fisher (2010).

This section should also identify any **ethical issues** which need addressing in your primary data collection e.g. anonymity, confidentiality, informed consent etc. You should adhere to the guidelines of the University (see link below), as well general good practice principles and those unique to certain organisations e.g. the UK's NHS, if appropriate. Unit 5 will help in this regard.

<https://staff.napier.ac.uk/faculties/business-school/research/Pages/Research-Integrity-Governance.aspx>

Research plan

This section is designed to identify the key events/activities in your research plan and then provide a concise and **Research** timetable which shows how they are linked, when they will take place and how long they will last. Some activities will have to be completed before others can be started, but there are others that overlap allowing activities to be undertaken concurrently.

It is usual to devise a Gantt chart, which gives a visual representation of the activities you will be undertaking and it normally covers each week and month between now and until submission of your Project. Construction of the Gantt chart can be done using MS Word, MS Outlook or MS Excel

{by creating shaded blocks to illustrate the lengths of activities}. If you have access, a more sophisticated chart can be created using specialised software such as MS Project.

This section may also contain additional commentary pertaining to any particular characteristics or nuances of your research and its schedule that may need highlighting. It is recommended that you include such commentary to contextualise and justify the schedule of activities appearing in your Gantt chart.

Reference list (not counted as part of your word count)

You are required to provide an alphabetical list of all references used in your research proposal, based on the APA 6th referencing system. Do not use a numbering or bullet-point system. Again, Unit 2 will remind you of the protocols for such referencing and the requirements of the APA 6th style.

For technical details of all APA 6th referencing conventions, please refer to Edinburgh Napier University's study and library guides to referencing - links to these are available on the module Moodle page.

Take care when listing web references **(which should be kept to a minimum)** to include the author's name and article title. Too many web references can also indicate an over-reliance on general online searches leading to less credible and corroborated academic sources than would normally be expected for this work.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Your research proposal should be prepared as a single Word file (or equivalent e.g. Open Office document). You should submit your research proposal through the Turnitin link on Moodle, including your submission cover sheet, by the due date and time publicised on Moodle. Include any diagrams and spreadsheets within this single document.

Make sure that your submission follows the structure and guidelines of the templates and examples.

The programme administrator will inform your supervisor that your proposal is available for marking.

A sample of proposals is also moderated independently by the module leader (for quality assurance purposes) and once all proposal marks are agreed, these are passed back to the programme administrator.

At this point, an email will be sent to your [**Edinburgh Napier University email address**](#) and you should contact your supervisor to arrange mutually convenient time to receive your grade and feedback. The proposal and its contents will form the basis of your MBA project and from now until the submission of your final project you will liaise with your supervisor at appropriate intervals. Separate documentation is provided relating to the requirements of the Project on the MBA Project moodle site.

Please note, you will not be able to progress to the MBA Project until you have successfully completed this Research Skills for Managers module.

MBA – RESEARCH PROPOSAL: GRADING CRITERIA

	Distinction	Pass	Fail
Identification of relevant and valuable topic area	Clear identification of the problem/issue, academic subject area and evaluation of the context of the research; a clear indication of why the research is potentially important to industry/organisations/practitioners.	Clear problem statement and subject area in which sufficient detail is given of the context of the research.	Insufficient detail to understand the issues/problems and context of the research.
Aim and objectives	Well formulated, focussed aims and objectives appropriate for addressing the identified problem/issue.	Aims and objectives clearly stated, and related to the states problem/issue, but a greater focus and clarity needed.	Aim and objectives are incomplete, too vague/general and/or inappropriate for dealing with the issue/problem.
Initial review of key literature	Demonstrates wide knowledge of relevant academic and practitioner literature which shows a good understanding of key issues/areas relating to the chosen research topic; provides a very clear link between literature and the aims/objectives of the project.	Demonstrates a range of appropriate academic literature which relates to key aspects of the chosen research area; provides sufficient explanation of how these will guide the project.	Evidence that knowledge and understanding is incomplete or superficial; chosen sources are inappropriate to research topic; and lack of rationale given for choice of literature.
Research design	Comprehensive methodology; demonstrates initiative, originality and creativity in combining research techniques (where relevant); provides a critical evaluation of the methods used and methods literature; alternatives discussed; clear statement on ethical considerations.	Clear description of methods used with the rationale made clear; methods are appropriate to aims and objectives.	Inability to identify and apply appropriate research methods to the chosen research area, and/or fails to justify and explain methods used.
Research plan	Presents a clear, feasible and detailed timetable identifying a complete range of activities pertaining to how the research will be undertaken; a realistic timeline including how many days/weeks will be spent on each of the various stages involved.	Presents a sound timetable indicating how the research will be undertaken, although some aspects relating to activities and their duration need further thought and clarification.	Poorly presented, incomplete and/or inappropriate timetable that fails to identify several key activities; unrealistic plans in relation to timings of activities.
References	Correct referencing including citation (in main proposal) of a wide range of relevant up-to-date academic, practitioner and methods literature.	Generally, correct referencing drawn from subject and methods literature, but occasional inconsistencies in style and/or a full range of sources not fully exploited.	Insufficient references to appropriate and up-to-date literature; fails to use both subject and methods literature; consistently poor or incorrect presentation of references.

MBA Research Proposal - Grading Sheet

Student name

Matriculation number

Criteria	Weighting	Grade	Comments
Introduction Select a relevant topic area and provide a sound rationale for proposed research – awareness of the value of the research project to industry, organisations and/or practitioners should be shown. Link to modules/topics studied in the programme should also be identified.	10%	D5 ▼	
Aim and objectives Clearly identify research aim and three or four specific objectives. Justification of the aim and objectives	20%	D5 ▼	
Identification and Initial Review of Key Literature Identification of at least 12 sound, relevant and valuable sources which link directly to the chosen research topic, aims and objectives. Clear rationale for choosing each source and correct referencing style used.	25%	D5 ▼	
Research Design Clear explanation of chosen research approach and research methods which is/are appropriate to the chosen research area. Strengths and weaknesses of research method(s) summarised and relevant ethical issues acknowledged. Business Research Methods textbooks referred to.	25%	D5 ▼	
Reference List Provision of a full reference list for all sources referred to in the proposal. Effective use of APA 6 th Referencing System.	10%	D5 ▼	
Research Plan Presentation of a clear and concise timetable for the research.	10%	D5 ▼	
Overall Grade		D5	
Marker's name and signature:			

REFERENCES

Fisher, C. (2010). Researching and writing a dissertation: An essential guide for business students (3rd ed.). S.I.]: VLeBooks.

Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2015). Research methods for business students (Seventh ed., Always learning). VLeBooks.