

Guidelines for preparing a PhD project proposal

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(A) General Qualifications

A ministerial order on the university PhD degree has been issued with reference to the university act. The ministerial order e.g. prescribes that applicants for 5 + 3 grants should have completed a Master's degree, but admission can also be based on a so-called 4 + 4 grant before the applicants have got their Master's degree. However, applicants may apply for a PhD fellowship before they get their Master's degree.

A committee with relevant academic and scientific qualifications will make an overall evaluation of all applicants on the basis of their motivation, documentation of academic skills, relevant experience, and the project description. The relevance of the project and the applicant's qualifications to carry out the project are vital to the evaluation. In this context the applicant's actual qualifications are of great importance and it is not a prerequisite for employment as a Ph.D. fellow to have a Master's degree in Laws (Master of Laws or MSc in Business Administration and Laws), as the necessary qualifications may be obtained otherwise.

(B) Description of PhD project proposals

The project proposal is a vital part of the application for a PhD fellowship. The proposal may not exceed five pages. Oftentimes, the project proposal will be preliminary – thus, it will be revised during the course of the PhD programme as the PhD fellow builds knowledge and gains experience. However, it is important that the preliminary project proposal is thoroughly prepared and accounts for the relevance of the project in relation to the law as well as one or more aspects of society. Furthermore, the project proposal should give a precise description of the overall and subordinate research problems and account for the planned description and analysis of the problems including use of sources of law in the project, e.g. legal dogmatics, legal philosophy, legal economy, or legal sociology.

Below you will find some guidelines relating to the content of your project proposal. It is, however, important to note that the guidelines are to be viewed as generalizations. The descriptions are not exhaustive, and it is not necessarily relevant for you to deal with all subjects in your project proposal.

The relevance of the project and its connection to society

Law is a social science and there is a close link between the legal set of rules and societal affairs in general. Research questions suitable for PhD projects will always be closely related to societal standings, e.g. the relation between the consumer vs. a company, a citizen vs. the public, and a national state vs. international authorities. The research theme must be based on this context and the project description must account for the connection and the relevance of the project.

The relevance of a project theme will be evaluated in relation to its scope and association with other problems, and these preliminary considerations will often lead to thoughts on how the problem can be analyzed as well as which sources of law would be relevant to include.

Description of the research theme

A PhD project will typically center around one main theme (the project theme). This main theme should appear clearly from the project description. This is to make sure that the PhD fellow knows exactly which overriding goals to pursue in the project. In order to secure that the project has a precise description, applicants are often encouraged to be able to explain their overall research theme in a single sentence. However, the main research theme must always be seen in connection to the explanation of the relevance of the project, and the description of the project should thus not e.g. just indicate that “this project will analyze the framework of local business”. The project description must explain the reason for the research, interests at stake, and the usefulness of the analysis.

A PhD project will oftentimes account for a single research theme, which will then give rise to several secondary or sub-ordinated projects. In the example with the local business it might be relevant to analyze the legal framework and rules for implied authority in municipal activities. A project proposal must include considerations on sub-ordinated projects, as this demonstrates that the applicant has worked meticulously with all aspects of the research theme.

Description of analysis, sources of law, etc.

After describing the main themes and their relevance the applicant should account for the process of completing the project. In this instance it is essential that the applicant explains how the present legal status will be described and analyzed. The project proposal should also encompass considerations on which sources of law to include as well as the possibility of including arbitration awards and foreign sources of law.

Furthermore, the project proposal should also account for and reflect on the applicant's considerations on theory of law related to the project. Why is this project suitable for the legal dogmatic research method? Should the research include comparative studies? Could economic studies help illuminate certain areas of the field of research? Considerations like these can be highly relevant when orchestrating the design of the project and must be described in the project proposal. The project proposal should also account for the consequences of any choices made in relation to legal methods.