

Guidelines for preparing a PhD project proposal

Department of Law, University of Southern Denmark

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 obtained their Master's degree. However, applicants may apply for a PhD fellowship, before they have their Master's degree.

A committee with relevant academic and scientific qualifications will make an overall evaluation of all applicants on the basis of e.g. their motivation, documentation of academic skills, relevant experience, and 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.

Description of the PhD project proposal

The project proposal is a vital part of the application for a PhD fellowship. The proposal may not exceed five pages.

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 description is not exhaustive, and it is not necessarily relevant for you to deal with all subjects in your project proposal.

It is important that the project proposal which is handed in along with the application

- is thoroughly prepared and in detail accounts for which factors lead to the main theme (the project theme) and, thus, explains the relevance of the project in relation to the law as well as one or more aspects of society
- gives a precise description of the overall research problem and the subordinate problems included in this
- accounts for the planned description and analysis of the problems. In this connection, it will be natural to explain both the use of sources of law and the theories of law which are expected to be included in the project, e.g. legal dogmatics, legal philosophy, legal economy, or legal sociology

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 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.

Research themes

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, the interests at stake, the usefulness of the analysis as well as the knowledge which the project is expected to contribute.

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.

Analysis, methods, sources of law, etc.

After describing the main themes and their relevance, the applicant should account for the methodical process of completing the project. It is pivotal that the applicant e.g. explains how the present legal status will be described and analyzed. The project proposal should encompass considerations on which sources of law could be included (and which factors to consider in that connection), the possibility of including foreign sources of law as well as e.g. the practical possibilities of collecting arbitration awards. The project proposal should also account for the consequences of any choices made in relation to legal methods.

Furthermore, the project proposal should 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.

December 2020