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Starting your PhD

A few words to begin with

The start of a PhD is typically characterised by a multitude of unanswered questions: relating to content, methodology and organisation. To steer this process in the right direction from the outset, it is essential to structure your project at an early stage.

A key tool for this is the *research proposal*. Its purpose is to clarify the content of the dissertation project, establish a sound methodological basis and draw up a realistic plan. By precisely formulating the problem statement, research question and approach, it becomes apparent at an early stage whether the project is viable, sensibly scoped and feasible within the intended timeframe. At the same time, the research proposal forms the basis for academic discussion with the supervisor and provides clarity regarding the objectives, the research interests and the planned contribution of the thesis. It should therefore not be viewed as a mere formality, but as an essential tool for quality assurance and for steering one's own research process. A first draft should ideally be submitted within the first six months of commencing the doctoral programme.

Structure of the research proposal

1. Background and Problem Statement
2. State of Research 1 (Literature Review 1)
3. Research Gap (based on Literature Review 1)
4. Research Question with Sub-Questions
5. State of Research 2 (Literature Review 2)
6. Research Methods
7. Research Procedure
8. Timetable (e.g. research visit)
9. Other projects (e.g. early-career researchers' conference)
10. Compatibility with other employment

Explanatory notes

The background and problem statement serve to place the topic within its broader context and to clarify the specific research objectives. The starting point is often a problem that is still rather open-ended, and may even be formulated in non-legal terms (e.g. arising from legal practice, legal policy or related disciplines), which is subsequently transformed into a precise legal question.

Literature Review 1 relates to the general subject area and serves to situate the problem (which may still be formulated in non-legal terms) within the existing state of research.

The *research gap* identifies open questions that have not yet been addressed. One of these open questions is then taken up as *the main research question*, accompanied by *sub-research questions*; the individual sub-research questions should be designed in such a way that answering them ultimately provides the answer to the main research question.

Literature Review 2 builds on this and focuses specifically on the author's own research question; here, the relevant works are analysed in depth and evaluated in relation to the author's own argumentation.

In the section on *research methods*, it should be explained whether, in addition to legal-dogmatic analysis, other research methods are employed.

The research plan provides an initial outline of the structure of the thesis.

The *timetable* provides an initial outline of milestones and the expected completion date of the thesis.

The section on *further projects* and *compatibility with part-time work*, if applicable, should outline what other activities are planned during the doctoral programme and, where relevant, explain how these are compatible with the doctoral programme.

Important

The concept and structure of the doctoral thesis will evolve and change significantly as the writing process progresses. The research proposal should therefore be regarded as a provisional working document – not as a final, definitive statement. An excessive pursuit of perfection is neither necessary nor advisable at this stage.

Recommended reading:

PRAVEEN B. MALLA, The Doctoral Researcher's Toolkit. A Guide to Effective Research, 1st ed. 2025, Taylor & Francis, 78.90 CHF (eBook: 65.90 CHF)

> This introductory guide assists PhD students on their research journey by providing an overview of the essential tools of a researcher.