

Preparing a PhD concept paper

PhD program, Faculty of Environment and Resource Studies, Mahidol University

1. What is the essential component of a PhD?

A PhD is a competent substantial research in a discipline that will make a contribution to theory by:

- Developing a new theory or a new content area
- Debunk an existing theory and/ or demonstrates fundamental shortcomings in that theory
- Extend on existing theory by merging two conceptually similar theories or by showing how two (or more) theories might be combined

Therefore, the basic proposition we look for is a contribution to theory (filling the knowledge gap i.e. attaining an originality), not how big the sample size is or how complicated the study design is.

2. Coming up with an area of interest/ a topic

You can come up with an area of interest or a topic from:

- A problem that has interested you for a long time
- The area in your Masters study
- Your supervisor or from a research project team

Essentially, you need to make sure that the area of interest has some theoretical base to it (this is where you make the contribution, not in solving some practical problem). Thus, not all data, no matter how big the data set, can be turned into a PhD. Not all PhD data has to be big.

3. Preparing a concept paper

Your concept paper will be judged by the following criteria:

- Does it present a set of overarching aims, objectives and research questions that focus and guide the study?
- Does it show evidence of an understanding of the theory in the area in which you wish to conduct your study?
- Does it demonstrate a clear understanding of the methods (including data sources, research instruments and methods of analysis) selected to respond to the aims, objectives and key research questions outlined in the study?

- Is the study original and substantive enough for consideration at the PhD level of study?

4. Content of a concept paper

- Introduction/ Background/ Problem statement
- Rationale
- Aims and objectives
- Method
- Proposed source of data
- Method of data collection/ Instruments
- Method of analysis
- Contribution to knowledge/ originality
- Maximum 2500 words (about 8 pages) including references

5. Work with your potential initial advisor

To prepare a potential concept paper you are required to contact one of faculty's instructor with knowledge associated in your area of interest to work with. Your concept paper is more likely to be accepted by the committees if you consult with the instructor and bounce your ideas off him.

6. Giving feedback

- Feedback may involve inviting you to revise the concept paper.
- Feedback may also involve providing you with summarized reports from the reviewers.
- If the PhD Committee accepts, we may call you for an interview.