

MSt in International Relations 2019 - 21

Thesis proposal guidance

It is important in preparing any research proposal to have a topic area in mind that is beginning to become well-focused and that engages you in both personal and/or professional ways. This is a good start. In addition, you should avoid the risk of too much overlap between previous academic work (undergraduate or other theses) and what you propose. What you propose to take on as an MSt student might grow out of previous work, but must not replicate it. It is also a strength to provide questions rather than answers. An academic thesis has to avoid polemic and any suggestion of merely going out to seek evidence to confirm pre-determined answers.

The three things I suggest you bear in mind as you develop and refine a proposal are as follows:

1. Try to bring some mention of reading around the subject into the presentation you make. It will be a strength if you can show some first steps down the research route. At this stage this could be either journalistic or scholarly material, or things that you have found through your work. What has been written about the topic in general, or about specific aspects? Whose theories and findings will you wish to test? Where do you think your research can make a contribution?
2. You will have to home in on few (maybe even on one) questions and themes rather than trying to do too much. A 25,000 word thesis is not actually that long a piece (three scholarly articles, a small proportion of a book) and there has to be a tight focus. Consider whether there is a smaller scale study on one area, or two at most, that you could do in depth and that can illuminate some of the other questions, en passant. Or what is the most important of the issues you raise?
3. Connected to the previous two issues, any proposal should sketch what you think will be your likely sources: interviews, publications by private or public or the NGO/IGO sector; scholarly work and journalism; legal cases; governmental or other public enquiries or hearings. Topics involving private sector firms can be hamstrung by the reluctance of firms to open up any records, so we would hope to see what materials you had already identified that can make your thesis 'do-able'.

Finally, it will be important for you to bear in mind the audience for your thesis proposal. The main functions it plays in our process will be to help the Course Directors decide on whether the application seems viable and, more important still, to convince academic colleagues that this is a topic and a student that they would wish to supervise.