# A Guide to Writing your Doctor of Business Administration Research Proposal

## Overview

This document is designed to help you think about, structure and write a research proposal for the Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) programme.  What follows contains an overview of the purpose of the proposal together with some advice on structure and content.

The research proposal is a key element of your application, alongside your curriculum vitae, and it has to perform a number of tasks which are covered in more detail below.  As part of your application, the proposal has to tell us what academic field(s) your research will be located in and contribute to (such as marketing, operations management, health care management, quality, corporate responsibility and such like).  In addition, because the DBA is a professional doctorate, you should also include a statement of the potential practical impact of the work (what problem you are trying to solve and why it is important).

A DBA research proposal therefore needs to show that there is a potential contribution to knowledge in both theoretical and practical senses.  That might appear daunting at this early stage, but you are not expected to already be an expert; this guide is intended to de-mystify the process of constructing your proposal.  What you write in your proposal is provisional and in outline form, presented with the aim of giving the reader a view of the potential of the proposed research.

## The Purpose of the Research Proposal

Your research proposal for the DBA has a number of important jobs to do, and these are summarised here.  Recall though that we understand that these are *proposed* and therefore at least partly conditional on how the project may develop.  It is common for research projects to refine and adjust their focus as they progress.

Your proposal will fulfil the following roles:

1. It gives a clear statement of the research theme (say Human Resource Management) and question (What factors inhibit the recruitment of staff for Telecommunications companies in Nigeria).  What is it that you want to find out?
2. It offers an overview of the key field (or fields) in which the research is to be grounded.  This will be achieved by setting out details of relevant literature based on existing research.
3. It sets out the likely methods to be used to address the research question.  It is important that you include information on how you will obtain access to the necessary data.  With DBA research this is likely to be your own organisation and industry.
4. It presents some tentative propositions about the potential contribution of the work.  For all doctorates this includes a contribution to our theoretical understanding.  For a DBA this should also include some suggestions of potential practical impact of the work.
5. The proposal should demonstrate that you can write clearly and concisely to convey your ideas.  Additionally, it should show that you have applied some evaluation to your chosen area and can think critically about it.  Again, we are not expecting you to be at doctoral level at this early stage, but evidence that you have dug beneath the surface of the topic is important.
6. The proposal forms part of the decision-making process on whether we have the capacity to supervise your area.  It is a good idea to look at the staff profiles on the website, as well as

the information on the school's research areas.  If in doubt it is always worth contacting the DBA Programme Director.

7. On the DBA, for successful applicants the research proposal forms the basis of your work on Module One of the programme.  You will make a presentation on your proposed research and then be offered guidance and advice in a supportive forum during the three-day module workshop.  It is therefore a starting point, not a binding contract.

## Structuring your Research Proposal

Overall the length of the proposal should not exceed 2500 words, excluding a reference list.  This should be enough for you to provide sufficient detail on your proposed research but remain relatively concise.

The proposal should be structured into the following sections:

Introduction and Research Question

The introduction should set the scene by stating the main research question, a brief statement of the area(s) of theory in which the proposal is related, and the practical context in which the research will take place.

The practical organisational context for the research may be unfamiliar to the reader, so this often needs some explanation.  The context will typically include some details on the organisation and industry that is the subject of the research.  It is important that the reader is given enough information to be able to see that the research question is relevant and important for that organisation or industry.

A brief overview of the literature

The purpose of this section is to show that you have considered what field of enquiry your proposed research is located in.  This then gives a strong indication of the area to which your DBA will seek to make a theoretical contribution.

A full literature review has to perform a number of jobs (mainly to show how your proposed work fits in to the academic subject area and existing literature).  However, for the purposes of a proposal, the key role is to give the reader a clear sense of what we think we know about a given topic to date, and what the ongoing debates or unanswered questions in the field might be.

Structurally, it is common for this to be done by adopting a chronological approach.  It is often logical to trace the development of an area of debate or theoretical development over time.  Where did a particular field come from?  When did academic debate and research start to emerge in your chosen field?  Even the most recent 'cutting edge' theoretical developments will have deeper roots and genealogy.

Your overview of the literature should ideally arrive at a point where it shows how your research question is aligned to an area of debate in the field, and consequently how important and potentially interesting your work might be.

We appreciate that operating outside of an academic institution may make it difficult to access all of the latest papers and books on a topic.  Please contact the programme director if this is problematic.

However, search facilities such as Google Scholar can frequently be used to access enough material to create a brief review for the purposes of a proposal.

Proposed methods

This section should tell us how you propose to collect and analyse the data to address your research question.

We do not expect DBA applicants to be experts on methodology and methods. Training on the philosophies underpinning methodological approaches, as well as the tools and techniques needed to collect and analyse data, will be part of the programme. You may wish to consider obtaining a research methods book to help, although this is by no means a necessity. There are a number available so by all means contact the programme director for a recommendation.

For this proposal we would expect you to show that you have considered what kid of data you will need to answer your research question as well as a realistic assessment of your ability at access that data. Even for experienced applicants, ambitious plans to interview the CEOs of the major firms in their sector might be overly optimistic! Ask yourself some simple questions: 'What data do I need to answer my question?'; 'What methods of collection might suit that data?' and, 'How can I obtain access to that data?'.

For example, you might decide that you need to gather qualitative data about employee's perceptions of a change management initiative to answer your question, or at least to understand the issue more deeply. That might naturally lead you to consider face to face interviews or focus groups as a means of collecting the data. Finally, you may then conclude that you will be able to realistically engage colleagues or industry employees without too many obstacles because of your contacts and experience.

Similarly, your proposed research question may imply the need for quantitative data. In that case the questions remain the same, namely what would be the best method of acquiring that data and how can I ensure access to it.

Some projects often combine different methods of data collection and analysis to shed light on a question in different ways. Different methods might be used in sequence. For example, initial exploratory interviews to help scope out a problem might then be followed up with questionnaires based on a higher degree of confidence in the landscape as a result of the initial research stage.

Again, it should be stressed that we are not expecting you to be experts. There are a huge variety of methods at our disposal, and the relatively simple examples offered here are not meant to be restrictive. The main thing your proposal needs to show is that you have considered what data will be needed to address your question and how you will obtain that data.

Therefore you should certainly include a few sentences about the people/businesses that you hope will participate and how you will gain access to them.

Finally, you should use this section of the proposal to state whether there may be any ethical implications of the research. These generally involve issues such as confidentiality, informed consent, the right to withdraw and so on. However please do contact us if we can assist.

A statement of the proposed contribution to knowledge

This final section is arguably the most tentative part of the proposal. It is clear that you are not going to know at this stage what the precise contribution to theoretical development or organisational practice will be.

However, it should be possible for you to offer an informed view of some potential outcomes for your research. It is common for contributions to be divided into theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge and methodological knowledge. The last of these three is rare, so we will focus on the first two.

The earlier section of the proposal will have provided an overview of the relevant literature that will underpin the research. You will have provided a sense of how this field has developed, as well as saying something about the key theories, models and frameworks in the area. This will therefore allow you to speculate that your research may help reinforce or challenge or extend our understanding of a particular theory or model.

For the purposes of a contribution to practice, you will have set out the context for your research in the introduction, making clear what problem or issue acts as the foundation for your research question. This similarly allows you to provisionally suggest that your research at least has the potential to improve organisational or industrial practice in ways that relate to the issue or problem you have identified.

Please note that you will not be held accountable to these; it is understood that your proposal is just that: a proposal. However well planned they might be, research programmes tend to evolve and undergo refinement as they proceed. The DBA offers a structured approach to guiding that evolution, along with a supervisory team.

A reference list

Please supply an alphabetic reference list of literature, websites, reports and so on that you have cited in the proposal.


**Some final advice**

When you write your proposal, aim for clarity and readability. There is no need to try to use overly academic language and terminology – we are interested in what you understand and think about your chosen area. If you do need to use technical terms and acronyms and so on from your own context then it can be helpful to provide a lay-person's explanation.

As you begin thinking about your topic, and especially as you begin reading, then so you can begin to draft your proposal. We all approach writing differently, but it is almost always a useful exercise to help you start refining your thinking.

Lastly, do not hesitate to contact us for guidance. The application process for the DBA is intended to be supportive.