

Finding a PhD or Masters by Research Supervisor, Preparing a Research Proposal, and Developing Your Application

Section 2.7.3, Section 2.7.5, Section 5.1.4, and Section 5.1.6 of the [Scholarships Handbook](#) list some specific requirements that must be met by PhD (and Masters by Research) applicants. These requirements relate to finding a supervisor, and preparation of a draft research proposal.

Before you submit your on-line Australia Awards Scholarship application you will need to undertake an initial investigation to locate an appropriate supervisor. Section 5.1.6 of the Scholarships Handbook makes it clear that when you submit your Australia Awards Scholarship application you will need to include evidence of communication between you and a potential supervisor, and that this needs to indicate in-principle support for your proposed research.

To locate an appropriate supervisor you will need to develop a draft research proposal that you will submit to potential supervisors, as discussed in Section 2.7.5 and Section 5.1.4 of the [Scholarships Handbook](#). Then if you are awarded a scholarship, this research proposal (or as appropriately modified) will be also used when a placement is sought for you at the university of your choice.

Finding a supervisor willing to take you can be a time-consuming exercise. As a consequence, you should start your search as soon as possible.

We have prepared some materials to help you with the tasks of finding a supervisor and preparing a research proposal. First, you should read the Frequently Asked Questions below. This will help you further understand how important the supervision issue is in Australian research degrees, and will provide you with advice about the steps you should take to find a supervisor. Second, you should then look at the document headed [Sources of Information on Potential Supervisors](#). This provides you with weblinks to lists of supervisors in each of the eligible Australian universities. You should note that the degree of detail provided by each university varies substantially.

Finally, when you think you have located a potential supervisor, you should write to them via email to see if they might be prepared to take you.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Why is finding a supervisor important?

PhDs and Masters by Research degrees are very different from undergraduate degrees. In Australia, PhDs and Masters by Research are usually entirely focused on a research project that results in a thesis. Rarely is there any requirement for coursework, or associated exams. The research degree process involves the student working closely with an experienced supervisor, usually over a period of at least three years. Universities generally expect that students will have made contact with a supervisor and obtained some indication of their interest, before they formally apply for admission.

However, if you receive an Australia Awards Scholarship, you will be required to demonstrate that you have received in-principle support for your research topic from a potential supervisor to enable placement to be made at your selected university.

2. Should I first choose a university, or first choose a supervisor?

Students searching for Bachelor and Masters coursework degree programs often start by assessing universities according to their rankings. This is understandable, as employers often look at the quality of university attended. However, the situation is very different for postgraduate research degrees. Here, the crucial issue is the choice of supervisor. Many of you will be attempting narrowly focused, specialized research topics. This is as it should be, but sometimes there will only be a small number of academics who work in your area of research interest. You will need to work with them, whichever university they might be based at. You may have friends or colleagues studying at a particular university, but you cannot go there unless you can find a supervisor who shares your research interest, and is prepared to take you. So your first choice should be to find a supervisor, regardless of his or her university location.

3. Does the standard of PhD or Masters by Research supervision vary across universities in Australia?

Unlike the USA, where the standard of university teaching can vary substantially across institutions, the Australian government tries hard to ensure that teaching standards are equal across universities. It is certainly true that some universities have been long established and are well known, but you can be assured that the standard of PhD and Masters by Research supervision will not vary, regardless of which university your supervisor is employed by.

4. Should I restrict my search for a supervisor to senior academics?

There is no reason to think that academic seniority means a better quality of supervision. Supervision by an older, more senior, academic carries the advantages of the contacts and experience they can provide but they are less likely to have time available for working individually with you. A younger academic, on the other hand, will have relatively recent experience of the practicalities involved in completing a PhD and is likely to make more time available to you - not least because your success will reflect well on them.

5. Why is it sometimes difficult to find a supervisor?

Australian academics are often very busy. They are required to teach, undertake research, and participate in university administration. This sometimes means that they only have limited time to take on new research students. In addition, some universities place limits on the numbers of PhD and/or Master by Research students that any one academic can supervise. This is done to try to keep academic workloads at a reasonable level, and to ensure that research students receive the attention that they deserve. For these reasons, it is sometimes difficult to find a supervisor prepared to commit to taking accepting you. It is best, therefore, to search widely for supervisors in the early stages of your application process.

6. When should I begin the search for a supervisor?

Finding a supervisor willing to take you can be quite a time-consuming exercise. As a consequence, you should start your search as soon as possible. Don't wait until just before you submit your application, as you will need to show evidence that you have made contact with a potential supervisor when you submit your application on-line.

7. What steps should I take to find a supervisor?

There are a number of different steps that you could take when looking for a supervisor. First of all, some of you will already have supervisors in mind, perhaps from Masters degree study in Australia, or from collaborations that you have developed with Australian researchers as part of your work responsibilities. If this is the case, you should contact these academics to gauge their interest in supervising you.

If you do not have existing contacts with potential Australian supervisors, you should start the search process by reviewing the research literature in your discipline area. For example, you should read back issues of recognized international academic journals, many of which are now available on line. Google Scholar is also a very useful tool for initial searching. You should also find articles published by Australian academics that are close to your area of research interest. You can then write directly to these academics, as journals always provide at least some contact details for authors of published articles.

You might also want to talk with work friends and colleagues who have research collaborations with Australian academics, or with Australia Awards alumni who have similar research interests to your own (you may contact the Alumni Manager at the Australia Awards Office Vietnam – Ms. Dang Thi Tan Huong, email alumni@australiaawardsvietnam.org). Talk to as many people as you can who have academic experience in your subject area. When the same names keep appearing, you are ready to draw up a shortlist of academics that you can approach for advice about supervision.

Finally, we have developed a list of web links that will lead you to the best available [Sources of Information on Potential Supervisors](#) for each eligible Australian university

8. What material should I send to a potential supervisor?

Potential supervisors need enough information about you, and your research idea, to be able to make a decision as to whether to accept you or not. You should also remember that this decision is entirely in the hands of the supervisor. You will need to “sell” yourself! Careful thought needs to be put into how much material to send to a potential supervisor. Too much will overwhelm them and too little will not provide enough information to enable them to make a decision.

Section 2.7.5 of the Scholarships Handbook states that PhD awardees require an “additional research proposal for Program Areas to submit to institutions”. Further, Section 5.1.4 states that “successful applicants selected to undertake a PhD or Masters by Research will need to provide Program Areas with a well-developed research proposal to submit to the institution as

part of the Request for Placement process. The proposal should include a proposed methodology, timeline and a brief literature review”.

We suggest that the most efficient approach is for you to develop a detailed proposal for the initial approach to a potential supervisor, and then to summarize it for the purposes of the online application form (section 8 – “Research proposal details”). This activity will take some time, so you should start as soon as possible.

9. What information should I include in the detailed research proposal and the proposal details for the on-line application?

Before you start, you should be aware that University websites and other resources often talk about completing the “research proposal”. Usually this is a very detailed document of around 5,000 to 10,000 words that universities require approximately 6 months after you arrive at an institution. Your supervisor will help you prepare this, as it almost always needs to be assessed and passed by a Research Committee at your university before you will be allowed to proceed.

We do not require this level of detail for the detailed research proposal or the research proposal details in the on-line application form. The length of the detailed research proposal is up to you, but as a guide, we suggest you should aim for around 10 pages (ie 2500 words). On the other hand, the length of the research proposal details required in the online application form will be determined by the word limits in each sub-section of the form.

To meet the structure requirements of both the detailed proposal and the online application form, we provide you with specific advice on the following:

- * research title (including research question);
- * objectives;
- * significance and possible application to development;
- * proposed research method (the approach that you believe you will take to answer the research question);
- * literature review;
- * timeframe; and,
- * fieldwork.

Research Title (including Research Question)

Even at this early stage, you need to develop a preliminary research title and more importantly, an overall “research question”. One of the hardest aspects of writing a research proposal is suggesting what you hope to discover. It is not easy to know what you are going to find out before you've carried out the research! However, the people who will assess your application realise that research objectives can change over the course of a PhD or Masters by Research degree. What they want to know is whether your research question is academically relevant, and practically plausible.

Deciding on a research question is important at this stage, as it can provide a powerful early direction and focus for your research. You should be able to state an overall research question

in one, or at most, two sentences. Here is an example of a research title and overall guiding research question, taken from the PhD proposal of the International Academic Advisor. This research had an organisational behaviour focus, and was based in a graduate business school in an Australian university.

Research Title: “The Relationship Between Environmental Regulation and Business Investment Strategy in the Mining and Minerals Processing Sector”.

Research Question: “How is business investment strategy in the mining and minerals processing sector affected by, or influenced by, environmental regulation?”

Objectives

There are a number of different ways in which you could present the objectives of your research. The main point is to suggest what you hope to discover at the end of your PhD or Masters by Research, and what new areas it might open up. One option would be to list a set of subsidiary questions that would help you to address the main research question. In a sense, the main objective of your research will be to answer subsidiary questions, and thereby to fully and finally address your main research question. Using the example from above, the International Academic Advisor developed the following subsidiary questions for his PhD:

- Are investments being forgone because of environmental regulations?
- What determines the way business investment decisions are made by firms in the mining and mineral processing sectors?
- Are the investment decisions made by Australian mining firms affected by environmental regulation?
- Is there any difference between the Australian perception of environmental regulation in pollution-havens, and the perceptions of investors based in those countries?
- How do overseas investors in the Australian mining sector perceive Australian environmental regulations, in comparison to both their own local situations, and to the perceptions of Australian investors?
- If there are differences in attitude and response towards environmental regulation, what determines them?

Significance and Possible Application to Development

A key assessment criterion for selecting PhD and Masters by Research scholarship awardees is how their research will assist with development in Vietnam, once they return from studies. You will need to elaborate on this issue, especially for the online application process. Here is an example from a hypothetical application where the research question is similar to the one introduced above, except that the focus is on Vietnam:

Findings from the proposed study could have the following major development outcomes:

- * *shedding light on whether current environmental regulation is effective in controlling the environmental impacts of mining and mineral processing in Vietnam.*
- * *pointing to failings in the existing national and provincial environmental regulatory system.*
- * *enriching the existing international literature on private sector behaviour in the face of environmental regulation.*
- * *offering options for the reform of national and provincial environmental regulation*

You should also take this opportunity to make clear the link between your past academic and work experience, and this research idea. We will want to see that you are not making a jump to some totally different area of research where you have no background.

Proposed Research Method

A very important part of the proposal is the outline of a clear and practical methodology which enables you to answer the research question. We fully understand that your ideas about how to approach your research question will mature and change over time. However, this preliminary outlining of a research method will provide us with an indication that you know how to undertake research. Eventually, for example in your full PhD research proposal, or in the “research design” chapter of your PhD thesis, you will need to show examiners that you understand terms such as: “theory”, “conceptual framework”, “methodology/research paradigm”, and “hypothesis”. However, for now, we are looking for answers to the following kinds of questions:

- * Is the research exploratory, descriptive or explanatory (ie what is the research strategy?).
- * What is the role of propositions/hypotheses in the research?
- * What units of analysis will be used?
- * How will analysis of data be undertaken?

Literature Review

In your detailed proposal, you will need to include a brief, preliminary literature review. The point of this is to show us that your research question and methodology are properly grounded in the research literature that surrounds your topic of interest. It also gives us confidence that you have given your topic proper consideration, and that you have not merely “plucked it from the air”. (The literature review is not required for the on-line application form.)

Timeframe

Your proposal should also include a simple timeframe, indicating when you will achieve significant outputs. (In the on-line application form the timeframe could be included in the sub-section on Proposal research method.)

Fieldwork

Not every research will require fieldwork. If your research involves field work, you should outline the purpose, location, scope and timing of the proposed field work in both the detailed

research proposal and in relevant sub-section of the application form (within the stated word limits). If your research does not involve fieldwork you do not need to address this issue in the proposal or in the online application form.

An important point to note is that the online application form suggests that you nominate a “field supervisor”. Do not be confused by this. This is meant to mean an overall research supervisor.

Finally, when you are ready to contact potential supervisors, you should write to them by email, attaching the abovementioned information.

10. Is there any other assistance that I can get in preparing to undertake postgraduate research?

The International Academic Advisor has developed a self-paced, online research design methodology course. This will be of most use to successful applicants, but it is available to all at the following research design course link.

In addition, if you are eventually selected for a PhD scholarship, you will be invited to a two-day research preparation workshop to be held on July 29 and 30 in Ho Chi Minh City, or August 3 or 4 in Hanoi.

Sources of Information on Potential PhD and Masters by Research Supervisors

“While the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade will make every effort to ensure that information is up to date and accurate, it is the responsibility of the user to check the Scholarships Handbook and relevant University Guidelines for specific requirements for obtaining a supervisor”

University	Comments/Notes
Australian Catholic University	A list of supervisors by school is provided at the “Research Expertise Register” at: http://corner.acu.edu.au/research_supervision/
Australian National University	A searchable list of research supervisors can be found at the “ANU Experts List” webpage: http://experts.anu.edu.au
Bond University	University-wide register of supervisors at: http://www.bond.edu.au/research/index.htm
Carnegie Mellon University Australia	No PhD offerings
Central Queensland University	University-wide searchable database at the “Research Expertise” webpage: http://www.cqu.edu.au/research/organisations/health-crn/scholarships/areas-of-research-expertise
Charles Darwin University	School-focused “Find a Researcher” website at https://www.cdu.edu.au/research/ori/find-researcher
Charles Sturt University	A searchable database by field or by academic’s name is available at: http://news.csu.edu.au/experts/search
Curtin University	A register of potential supervisors can be found at: http://www.curtin.edu.au/research/find-researchers/supervisors/ . However, it only lists general areas of academic interest, rather than specific available research topics. Some staff provide links to a “staff profile”, which sometimes lists detailed research interests.
Deakin University	Information on “finding a supervisor” can be found at: http://www.deakin.edu.au/study-at-deakin/research-degrees-doctoral-and-masters/finding-a-supervisor
Edith Cowan University	There is a searchable database where supervisors may be found by selecting from a variety of options : https://apps.ecu.edu.au/supervisor-register/research_view/index.php
Flinders University	A searchable list for Research Supervisors and their fields of interest can be found at http://flinders.edu.au/graduate-research/find-a-supervisor.cfm
Griffith University	A searchable data base can be found under “Find Experts” at: http://research-hub.griffith.edu.au/researchers#fq={!tag=classgroup}classgroup%3A%20vitroClassGroupresearchers
James Cook University	A searchable, “Research Portfolio” webpage can be found at: http://research.jcu.edu.au/portfolio/search/
La Trobe University	No University-wide searchable database of supervisor research interests. Individual faculty websites can be found at :

	http://www.latrobe.edu.au/postgrad/apply/find-a-research-supervisor
Monash University	A University-wide searchable database can be found at: http://monash.edu/research/profiles/ . Individual faculties provide lists of supervisors and their research interests under the “research” link on each faculty website. All faculty websites are listed at: http://www.monash.edu.au/faculties/
MacQuarie University	A University-wide search can be undertaken using the Macquarie University Supervisor Register (MQSR) at: http://137.111.71.14/MQSR/ Higher Degree Research webpages, and a detailed Guide is available at: http://www.hdr.mq.edu.au/information_about/hdrguide/HDR_HBK_and_GUIDE_2013-2014.pdf
Murdoch University	Links to staff research interests can be found for each school at: http://our.murdoch.edu.au/Research-and-Development/Resources-for-students/Future-research-students/Your-research-project/Search-for-a-supervisor/
Queensland University	Supervisor interests can be searched at the “UQ Researchers” webpage at: http://researchers.uq.edu.au
Queensland University of Technology	Links to supervisors and their specific areas of interest can be found at : http://staff.qut.edu.au . For more information on the process of choosing a supervisor the “Finding a Supervisor” webpage can be found at: https://www.qut.edu.au/study/phds-and-research-degrees/finding-a-supervisor
RMIT University	Members of “research groups” ... and their individual interests ... can be found at: http://www.rmit.edu.au/browse;ID=g9203seifylf
Southern Cross University	Prospective research students are directed to first contact the relevant School Director for Higher Degree by Research Training. This list can be found at: http://www.scu.edu.au/research/index.php/69/
Swinburne University of Technology	Information on research output can be found at: http://researchbank.swinburne.edu.au/vital/access/manager/Index
University College London (School of Energy and Resources Australia)	General Information about research opportunities can be found at : http://www.ucl.ac.uk/research-at-ucl/
University of Adelaide	Lists of research expertise can be found at the University Staff Directory webpage at: http://www.adelaide.edu.au/directory/expert/
Federation University	A list of research areas can be found at: http://federation.edu.au/research-and-innovation/research-areas
University of Canberra	Research students are requested to find supervisors by contacting Faculty Representatives listed on the “How to Apply” webpage: http://www.canberra.edu.au/research-students/apply
University of Melbourne	A source of research supervisors can be found at the “Find an Expert” webpage: http://www.findanexpert.unimelb.edu.au/ . This can be searched according to a number of criteria, including country, and research interest.
University of Newcastle	A University-wide register of supervisors can be found at: https://dotnet.newcastle.edu.au/RHDOpportunities/SearchPage.aspx
University of New England	Staff and their research interests are listed in each of the faculty and school webpages. These can be found at: http://www.une.edu.au/search?query=research%20institutes%20and%20centres%20procedures&clive=une-staff&collection=une-meta
University of New South	A searchable database is available to find Research Supervisors through the use of key words: http://research.unsw.edu.au/researcher

Wales		
University of Notre Dame Australia	Information on research degrees can be found at: http://www.nd.edu.au/research/degrees.shtml	
University of South Australia	Searchable University-wide supervisor website at: http://www.unisa.edu.au/Research/CRMA/Degrees/Supervisors/	
University of Southern Queensland	The University's "Expert Finder" webpage is located at: http://webnet.usq.edu.au/USQExperts/default.aspx	
University of the Sunshine Coast	Research output can be found at the "Coast Research Database": http://research.usc.edu.au/vital/access/manager/Index.jsessionid=EDB3A9F2D6E0598907BDFB8D4C90565E .	
University of Sydney	A University-wide searchable database providing access to available supervisors can be found at the Research Supervisor Connect website: www.usyd.edu.au/research/opportunities	
University of Tasmania	University-wide searchable database at Level 1 of the "Web Access Research Portal": https://rmdb.research.utas.edu.au/public/warp/index.htm .	
University of Technology Sydney	A source of research supervisors can be found at the "Find an Expert" searchable webpage: http://www.experts.uts.edu.au/ . Alternatively, contact the Research Administrator in each Faculty at: http://www.gradschool.uts.edu.au/faculty-contacts.html .	
University of Western Australia	University-wide searchable database at "Search for a Research Expert": http://www.research.uwa.edu.au/ . Also see the "Research Expertise" searchable website at: http://research.publishing.uwa.edu.au/research and the "Organising a Supervisor" website at: http://www.studyat.uwa.edu.au/postgrad/research/preparation/supervisor	
University of Western Sydney	Information on research groups is provided at: http://www.uws.edu.au/research/research_groups	
University of Wollongong	Links to research staff in faculties is provided at: http://www.uow.edu.au/about/faculties/index.html	
Victoria University	A comprehensive list of research areas can be found at: http://www.vu.edu.au/research/research-focus-areas-expertise/research-focus-areas	
Other sources of help	http://learningforsustainability.net/research/phd_research.php	Very good website with advice about writing a thesis and dealing with supervisors
	http://www.altc.edu.au/resources?text=supervision	The website for research projects on supervision, undertaken under the auspices of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council.
	http://www.mq.edu.au/ltc/about_ltc/hdr/resources.htm	Good information from a range of universities about supervision issues (see the links under: "other resources on quality supervision"). Contains a useful link on cross-cultural supervision: http://www.mq.edu.au/ltc/altc/cross_cultural_supervision_project/index.htm