Planning Your Research and Applying for Funding at Doctoral Level

What is 'research'?

Academics talk about 'research' quite obsessively. But what do we mean by 'research'? In some way, all academic activity, from school to university, concerns research in the form of *discovery*. School children conduct research when they investigate and uncover something that is *new to them*. This kind of research involves (to use the current jargon) 'knowledge transfer'. In other words, extant knowledge is transferred to the learner when he or she discovers something new in an independent fashion.

Every piece of academic work therefore concerns 'knowledge transfer'. In higher education, and particularly at Masters level and above, we are more clearly concerned with knowledge generation. This kind of research is not only concerned with appropriating to oneself knowledge that is already available, or conveying to others extant knowledge; the kind of research involved in doctoral work entails, in some way, the creation of new knowledge by using a critical and systematic form of enquiry. In the context of the humanities, 'knowledge' is a broad term which does not refer merely to the uncovering of new 'facts' (e.g. the dating of a text). Knowledge generation can also refer to a development in *appreciation*, *understanding* or *interpretation*.

Finding a Topic

Many prospective doctoral students have a very vague idea of the area they plan to research. In many ways, this is appropriate and understandable: if research is to be original in some way, it is impossible to tell in advance and in any detail which lines of enquiry will prove important and fruitful. However, research must be planned. Before you write a proposal and apply for funding, you must spend some time in the library exploring potential topics and **thinking** about your research. The topic is unlikely to pop into your head over lunch in a ready-made form.

The first question is, what kind of topic are you looking for? Broadly speaking, the topic needs to fit the following criteria:

- You must be able to treat it adequately in single thesis of 80000-100000 words;
- You must be able to complete it in a given time frame (usually 3-4 years);
- It must be practically and financially viable (e.g. will you need to travel in order to explore an archive? Are the primary sources readily available?);
- It must be focussed. Points of focus could be:
    - A particular concept (e.g. virtue; illumination; governance of the Church);
    - A particular figure or group of figures;
    - A particular archive or document;
    - The history of a particular location (e.g. a parish or village);
    - A certain historical period;

- An aspect of a theologian's or philosopher's thought;
- An aspect of Biblical history or interpretation;
- A school of Biblical Studies;
- In practical theology, a particular ecclesial phenomenon restricted to a certain time or place (e.g. hospital chaplaincy with special attention to the spiritual care of children).

Sometimes, you will be able to find a very clear topic by combining some of these criteria, for example by studying a particular concept within a certain historical period (e.g. the concept of illumination in twelfth century theology).

- Most importantly, it must interest you and build on your existing knowledge. The research must also be within your capabilities. If you have an existing skill (for example, if you have certain skills in qualitative research, or fluency in a foreign language), can your research exploit that skill? On the other hand, will your proposed topic of research require you to acquire a new skill (e.g. a language (particularly ancient languages) or knowledge of statistical analysis)? If so, in your 'Case for Support' you should give a very clear account of how you plan to acquire this skill in the section headed 'Preparation and Previous Skills'.
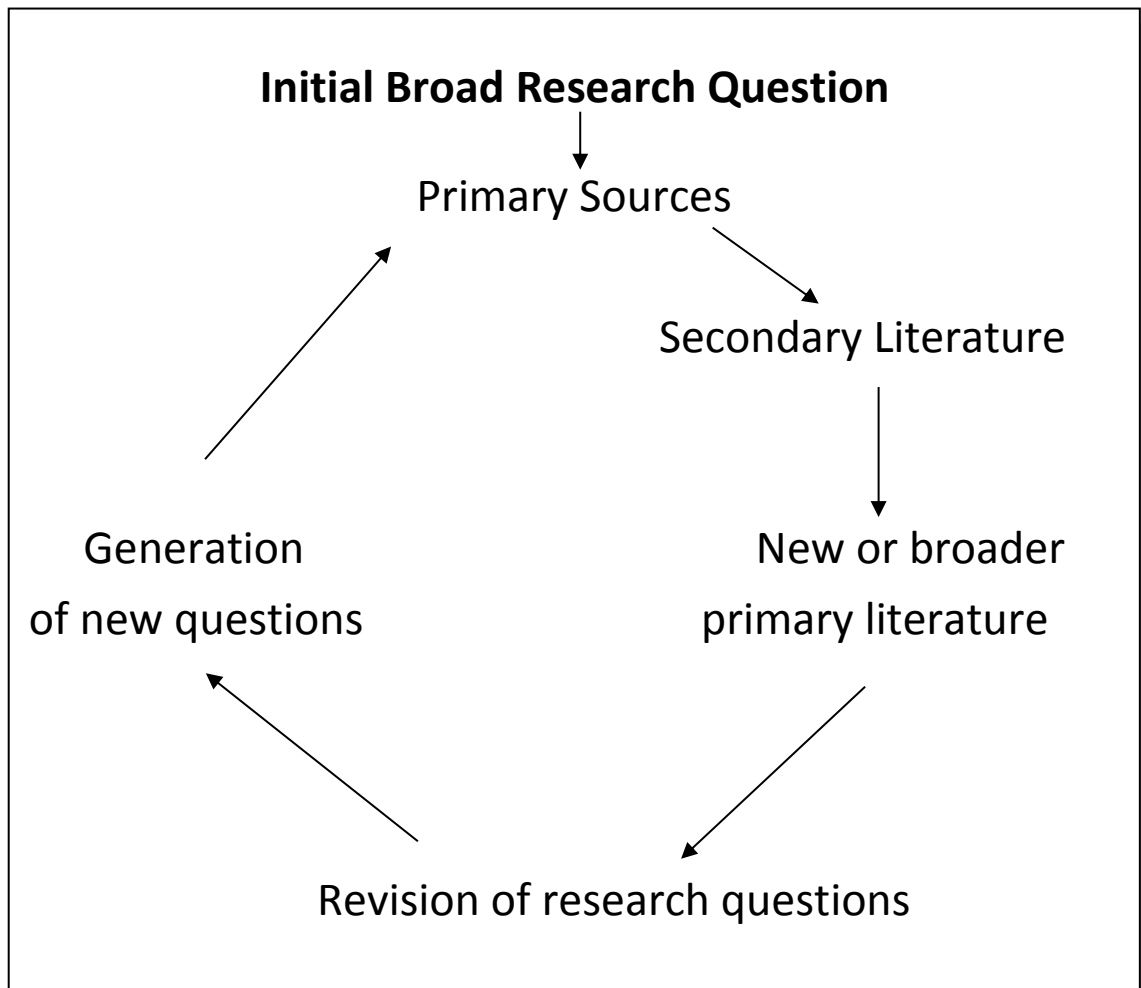
There are a number of further ways in which you can identify a topic:

- Look at recently published articles and see if you can identify trends. For example, has there been a rash of articles on Christology or a particular historical figure?. Having done this, look for any obvious gaps and avoid areas which have been well researched (or even over-researched) in the recent literature.
- When you are looking at published material from the past, are there any areas of research which have been tentatively explored but not followed up? Could you exploit any of these areas?
- Are you aware of a particularly useful archive or set of historical documents that could be the focus of research? For example, does a local cathedral, church or religious community have an archive? Bear in mind that the archives of very prominent religious institutions have often been well mined (many cathedrals, for example, have their own historians), but parish or local churches can be treasure houses of fascinating and undiscovered history.

It is vital that you consider *why* your research topic is important and suitable. For example, if you would like to research the thought of a little-known figure in the English Reformation, you should not simply state that 'he's little-known and therefore needs researching'. Some more significant reasons are required. For example, this figure may have left a particularly detailed diary, or had unexplored links to important political figures of the period. Simply saying 'we don't know about this, so I'll find out' is not quite enough. You should give some sense of why we would want to know about your chosen topic.

The Process of Research

As you prepare your research topic, it's worth thinking about the process of doing doctoral research. Where does it begin and how does it evolve? A good research project will go through significant periods of change and refinement. What particularly characterises research at doctoral level is the ability to mould research questions and maybe even generate new research questions. The following diagram illustrates how this process might develop.

Initial Broad Research Question

Primary Sources

Secondary Literature

Generation
of new questions

New or broader
primary literature

Revision of research questions

Of course, research is never as neat as any diagram might suggest. The key point, however, is that a researcher does not merely approach material looking for answers to a given question (as an undergraduate might), but takes a more 'conversational' approach. An initial research question (a hypothesis, if you like) is addressed to the material, but the material must be allowed to alter and refine that question. Good research in the humanities so often revolves around asking the right question and pinpointing the key issues.

The 'conversation' which lies at the heart of good research must be undertaken not only with the primary material (for example, the archive, documents or core foundational texts) but also with the secondary literature (for example, *writings about* such archives, documents or core foundational texts). Why? Because you must be able to situate your own research within the wider field of extant scholarship so that you can demonstrate *your* contribution to learning. This is particularly important at doctoral level.

With all this in mind, your research proposal may mention where you will commence your research. Can you identify a set of manageable primary sources? Most importantly, what are your initial research questions? What are you trying to discover and how will you begin your investigations? A proposal might include up to five initial research questions.

The Research Proposal/ Case for Support

This should be completed in no more than two sides of A4 with the following headings.

Project Title

Simply provide the provisional title of the project. This should be as concise and informative as possible.

Research Project

The student should give a synopsis of their proposed research project. Following a short executive summary of the project (c. 2 paragraphs), this section should have the following sub-headings: research questions, research context and research methods.

Research Questions

The main thrust of this section should be the research problems or questions the student intends to address in their doctoral study. The student must also define his or her objectives in terms of seeking to enhance knowledge and understanding in relation to the questions or problems to be addressed.

Research Context

What is the research context (background) in which those problems or questions are located? In other words, what is the current state of the field? Which are the 'hot topics' and key debates? Who are the key figures and why is their work particularly important or controversial? Crucially, how will the proposed research develop this area of enquiry? Why is it important? What particular contribution the student's project will make to the advancement of creativity, insights, knowledge and understanding in the area? The fact that an area has not been studied previously is not, in itself, a case for the work to be supported. We are also seeking a description of relevance beyond the development of the student's own skills or experience, though this is important too.

If a student has already begun their doctoral study, it is important that they give some indication of the work they have undertaken to date, e.g. information on any chapters or major pieces of work they have completed.

Research Methods

What method(s) and critical approach(es) does the student plan to use to address the problems or questions they have set? We don't just need to know what the student is going to work on; we need to know how they plan to go about it. For example, which sources will the student use? The student will need to state where these sources and materials are located and how these will be accessed. For example, if the student is undertaking an historical project on a particular archive, do they need a permit to access the archive, and how will this be obtained?

The student should say, as far as they can, how the project will develop or how they will structure the work over the period of the award. The student should identify and address any ethical issues relating to the research project. It should be noted that almost all research which involves human subjects (e.g. conducting interviews) will involve questions of research ethics while will require consultation with a University ethics officer or committee.

Please note that proposals in the area of practical theology require particularly careful assessment of methods. For example, it is not adequate to state simply that the project will or might include a survey or set of interviews. Conducting this kind of 'qualitative' research is a sophisticated area of social scientific methodology which requires careful preparation and certain key skills. For example, if a student proposes to conduct a set of interviews, what kind of interview will this be? Who will be the subjects and how will they be selected? What will be the size of the sample? How will the results be interpreted and used within the wider project? Are there any anticipated problems with conducting this kind of research?

Preparation and previous experience

The student should give a brief indication of any previous experience or preparation that is relevant to their proposed doctoral study. For example, they may wish to highlight key areas of their Master's study. Where applicable, the student should also include training and preparation, additional to the formal undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications already listed, which is relevant to their proposed study, for example the knowledge of a relevant language. If the student is aware of additional training, (e.g. language skills or social scientific research methods) that they will require in order to complete their studies, it should be included in this section. The fact that the student requires further training will not be regarded by the assessors as a sign of weakness. However, some indication of how these skills will be acquired should be given.

Relation to Vocation and Ministry

How does the proposed are of research relate to the applicant's sense of vocation to the diaconate and/ or priesthood? How will the research enable the applicant to contribute to the life and mission of the Church?