

THE WHAT, WHY AND HOW CONSIDERATIONS : BEFORE DRAFTING A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

I. Choosing a research question

The first step in thinking about a proposal is answering three important questions:

1. **What:** What is the contribution your enquiry will make? What problem is it trying to address?

2. **Why:** Why is your question /topic important?

For example:

- a. It fills a gap in the literature. Explain what this gap is and why it is important to fill this gap.
- b. It is a new approach to ...
- c. It looks at an old problem (name the problem) in a new way ..(what new way)
- d. It is an under researched area (for example an aspect of gender-based violence in the workplaces of domestic workers) and it matters because ..
- e. It seeks an in-depth understanding of a specific topic, issue. (Explain why gaining this understanding is valuable and how it contributes to the broader field of knowledge.)

3. **How:** How will you answer your research question? What will your method be?

For example:

- a. I will discuss three Constitutional Court cases (name them) that deal with discrimination to show that(name what you will show)
- b. I will draw on the work of xxx (theorist) to reflect on xx case studies (give details of case studies). I have chosen these case studies because
- c. I will use xx theoretical lens (describe the lens) and empirical work in the form of 30 semi-structured interviews with xx (who will be interviewed and where?). I have chosen these case studies because
- d. I will use insights from human rights law to ...
- e. I will compare jurisprudence from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights with the jurisprudence and the African Union Court on Human and People's Rights about (name the topic) to show that ...(set out your key arguments)
- f. I will build on findings or arguments from previous editions of xxx by analysing how these have evolved over time and addressing unanswered questions or gaps that remain.

Examples of Responses to the What, Why, how questions

What? Pervasive harassment of workers in the public health sector (various reported cases, available reports on the problem)

Why? A new approach to a longstanding issue that negatively impact individuals, organisations, and public health services

How? Discussion of (comparative) regulatory strategies to prevent bullying and harassment in the public health sector (for example, exploring the possibility & feasibility of an ombud (for workers - as the current ombud is for patients/the public)

II. Different types of contributions

There are many different contributions for your Master's thesis to be original, for example:

- a. A conceptual contribution.
- b. Bringing two bodies of literature into conversation with each other.
- c. Building theory from the bottom up ('grounded theory') through using a theoretical framework to engage with case studies.
- d. Empirical work – collecting and analysing data to contribute to knowledge in a given sub-field.
- e. Legal analysis of legislation and case law

III. What to do if you struggle to answer the what, why and how questions

When choosing a topic, bear in mind that a lot has probably been written about it. Therefore it's best to choose a topic that you already know a lot about and that really interests you. Or, if you are wanting to use the topic of your dissertation as a career move, choose something that really interests you and be prepared to read a lot! Once you have read, discuss your ideas with people in industry, policy contexts and/or academics. Discussing your idea with others is one way to help articulate the answer to the "Why" question: why is this idea/question/contribution important; what does it add to the debate/knowledge gap/policy context etc.?

Answering these questions requires a lot of research and thought. If you want to choose your own topic, there are no shortcuts to putting in the required effort, but you can ask a potential supervisor to point you to readings, or once you have identified the What and the Why, to help you think through the How.

If you don't have an idea for a topic, speak to your lecturers (or researchers in the Faculty Centres) who may be working on research projects and may have a research question or topic that may interest you.