

Things to consider for a research project proposal

IME Guidance for Elective Bursary Projects

It is important in your application for an elective bursary that you can demonstrate an understanding of the methods you propose to use in your project, and show an appreciation of the challenges and feasibility of your proposed project.

When outlining your project, there are some key things to bear in mind, and some key components to include. The best research proposals will say something about all of the items below, and we advise you to structure your proposal following sections 1-6 below.

Title

The title can either be in the form of a statement that describes what your research will do, or in the form of a question. It should be clear and concise.

Aim and Research Question(s)

Your proposal should have an overarching aim that makes it clear what you are trying to achieve. This may be a question (for example *“This project asks the question ‘It is permissible to tax unhealthy foods to promote public health’*); it could be a statement of an exploratory aim (for example *“This project aims to explore the permissibility of taxing healthy foods to promote public health”*); or it could be a statement of intent (for example: *“This project will argue that it is ethically permissible to tax unhealthy foods in order to promote public health”*).

Example: *Aim to identify the challenges encountered in and by clinical ethics support services in the UK, and make recommendations for how these should be addressed*

Your proposal should also have specific research question(s) that can be answered in order to meet your aim. Proposals should have at least one primary research question and *may* also include further secondary questions. Answering the secondary question(s) helps you to answer the primary question.

Your primary research question may be very similar to your aim but should be phrased as a question.

Primary Research Questions: What are the challenges encountered in and by clinical ethics support services in the UK, and how should these be addressed?

Secondary Research Questions:

1. What, according to the literature, are the challenges encountered in and by clinical ethics support services?
2. *What, according to those involved in the provision of clinical ethics support in the UK, are the challenges encountered in and by clinical ethics support services?*

Example: *How should the challenges encountered in and by clinical ethics support services in the UK be addressed?*

Outline, background and importance

Here you should explain what is known about your chosen topic, referring to relevant literature, and explain what the gaps are in our knowledge/understanding. You should then explain why answering that question is important and how your work will contribute to our understanding of the issues under examination, thus furthering knowledge and academic debate.

Tip: *In this section, your job is to persuade us that you have a good question and that the research is sufficiently important for us to fund your project.*

Approach (methodology and methods)

Research in medical ethics and law takes various forms and can use a range of different methods. It is important that you can demonstrate you have thought carefully about the methods you will use and that you have a plan for conducting your research.

You will need to decide whether you will conduct theoretical/library-based research, or a combination of empirical and theoretical research. For an elective project you may choose to use a structured reflection approach to addressing your project aim. Here, we provide some guidance on the different approaches:

Theoretical Projects: Projects may be entirely literature-led. Such projects will essentially involve thinking about the problem conceptually, reading and engaging critically with others' accounts and/or (for example) primary legal sources, and using argument to arrive at an answer to the research question(s). The exact process (and the sources you use) will depend on your question but, broadly, you will be critically examining different positions and accounts, looking at what others have said about the issues, and developing your own account of the problem and proposing a solution.

If you are taking this approach, you need to state that you will be undertaking theoretical research and briefly outline the main sources (e.g. legislation, judgments, arguments and thinkers) you expect to engage with. You do not need to actually start conducting analysis or making an argument, but the best proposals will:

- a) make clear the order in which key material and arguments will be tackled and why; and,
- b) make clear any theoretical commitments and/or lenses through which your analysis will be conducted..

Combined Empirical-Theoretical Projects: In addition to theoretical engagement, projects may include an empirical dimension i.e. quantitative or qualitative inquiries, which are designed to help answer the research question(s). Such projects will involve thinking about the problem conceptually but also undertaking some empirical research that is designed to inform or guide your conceptual thinking. This approach might be captured by the term 'empirical bioethics'.

If you anticipate taking such an approach, it is important that you do the following:

- a) State clearly what the purpose of your empirical research is. For example, are you interviewing people in order to get a better understanding of how to characterise an ethical/legal problem or question? Are you speaking to practitioners or other stakeholders to find out how acceptable or workable a proposed solution to a problem is? Are you gathering data about what people value or prefer in order to inform your own critical judgement?
- b) State which empirical method(s) you will use (e.g. interviews, focus groups, questionnaires) and why, and demonstrate an understanding of what the chosen method involves.

State your proposed approach to analysis of any data you plan to collect (e.g. *thematic analysis*, *descriptive statistics*).

Focused reflection: There are several different models that can be used for a focussed reflection. Whichever model you use it is important to state this clearly in your application and show how using this model can help you to achieve your project aim. Think about what the primary focus of your reflection will be, and what relevant literature you will need to refer to in your evaluation and analysis. Specifically, you should give some details of the ethical analysis you intend to carry out within your reflection.

When outlining your approach, you need to show that you have enough preliminary understanding of your proposed methods to undertake your project. It is important that the methods you propose are feasible and will enable you to answer your research questions and meet your aim.

Anticipated Timeline/Milestones

In this section you can demonstrate further understanding of your methods, and the feasibility of what you propose, by defining key milestones (key things that you need to achieve in your project), the order in which you need to do them, and how long you think it will take to do each. Examples of milestones include research ethics approvals, data collection, analysis, and report writing. What we are looking for here is for you to demonstrate an understanding of what it is feasible to achieve in the time you have available for your project.

Bibliography (*References*)

Please ensure you properly cite all sources you use in your proposal and include a list of references at the end.