CHSR Guideline for Proposal, Seminar and Thesis Organisation-2026

[This MPhil & PhD Research guideline has been developed by Centre for Higher Studies and Research (CHSR), Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP), in consultation with leading universities worldwide to promote standardisation and ensure a uniform framework for structuring research proposals and preparing high-quality thesis i.e., dissertation. ***'CHSR Guideline for Proposal, Seminar and Thesis Organisation-2026'*** *is expected to be followed by all researchers of CHSR, BUP. However, researchers are at liberty to exercise appropriate flexibility '(to deviate from this format) in consultation with supervisor, if relevant and logically important in line with respective research. This guideline primarily emphasises the social sciences; however, researchers of other disciplines, including the sciences and business studies and so on, may adapt its components to suit their respective research contexts.]*

CHSR Guideline
Research Proposal of MPhil &PhD: Components and Illustration

1 Title of Research
Title of the research should be clear, concise and specific. It should be self-explanatory, focusing on the core themes and may imply variables, population and context. Title should avoid punctuation marks except colon. Abbreviations should generally be avoided except universally accepted acronyms and ellipses. The title does not have to be constructed as a full sentence.

2 Background of the Study
Describes the context, current situation, related existing and previous knowledge, bridging the research problem between present and past, confirming the problem is relevant. The background should be duly supported and justified with the latest references.

3 Statement of the Problem
The 'statement' articulates the above-mentioned 'problem' by clearly identifying, defining and illustrating it. The statement may elucidate the problem's magnitude, relevance and implications at the local, regional, and/or global levels. The problem statement should be justified with due references, pointing to major potential research gaps and issues for investigation.

4 Rationale of the Study
The rationale explains why the study is important from various perspectives, such as academic, empirical, socio-economic, political and so on. It justifies the conduct of the research by demonstrating how the study will address the identified research gap and contribute to creating new knowledge and thereby ensuring advancement in the field.

5 Research Objectives (RO)
Research gaps, research objectives and research questions are interconnected and well-aligned. While the number of research questions and specific objectives may vary, each specific objective should correspond to at least one research question.

6 Research Questions (RQ)

The research questions should be specific, clearly focused and manageable so that the targeted answers and results are scientifically and realistically obtainable. Every specific research question should address a single, clearly defined purpose and should not be double barreled. The research questions should be clearly aligned with and directly informed by the research objectives.

Note: Either of the research objectives or questions may be placed before or after. It is not always mandatory to have both research objectives and questions.

7 Hypotheses (if applicable)

A hypothesis is a specific and measurable prediction about the relationship between two or more variables. It is primarily used in quantitative research to guide empirical investigation. Statements that describe universally accepted facts, obvious phenomena, or well-established knowledge should not be formulated as hypotheses. Each hypothesis should be logically derived from the literature and should be aligned with research questions and objectives. However, it is not always mandatory to have hypotheses.

8 Literature Review

The literature review critically examines the existing body of knowledge relevant to the research problem by identifying the strengths, limitations, similarities, dissimilarities, inconsistencies, and gaps in previous and existing studies. Depending on the nature and objectives of the study, the literature review may include one or more of the following approaches:

8.1 Thematic Review: Examines recurring themes, concepts, patterns, and issues across existing literature.

8.2 Systematic Review: Employs a structured, transparent, and replicable process to identify, select, evaluate, and synthesise relevant studies.

8.3 Theoretical Review: Critically analyses existing theories, conceptual models, and theoretical perspectives relevant to the research problem.

8.4 Empirical Review: Reviews previous empirical studies, focusing on their research designs, methodologies, findings, and limitations.

The literature review should compare existing knowledge across different contexts, identify knowledge and research gaps, and create justification for the proposed study. It establishes a strong foundation for the research objectives, research questions and hypotheses (where applicable).

8.5 Matrix (summary) of Literature Review can be presented in a tabular form (optional).

8.6 Research Gaps

This section identifies theoretical gap (where existing theories or concepts are insufficient to adequately explain a particular phenomenon), methodological gap (limitation or deficiency in existing research methods that leaves a phenomenon insufficiently investigated or understood), contextual gap (an area where existing research has not adequately examined a phenomenon within a particular geographical, cultural, organisational, or situational context) and knowledge gap (an area where existing research provides insufficient or incomplete knowledge about a particular phenomenon, issue, or relationship) in existing literature. It highlights what previous studies have

not adequately addressed and explains how the proposed research should fill these gaps. The research gap demonstrates areas where the existing evidence is insufficient, inconsistent, outdated, or unexplored in terms of knowledge, theories, contexts, methods etc. (As per the research problem concerns).

Note: The researcher can draft the initial research questions before reviewing the literature and in line with that, he/she can formulate the ultimate research questions and objectives after reviewing the literature and extracting the research gaps.

9 Theoretical Framework (as applicable)

The theoretical framework explains the theories underpinning the study and their relevance to the research problem, particularly in qualitative research. It provides the theoretical lens through which the phenomenon is examined, ensuring that the study is grounded in established and structured knowledge rather than researcher's personal assumptions. Only theories that are directly relevant to the study should be included, and the use of unnecessary or unrelated theories should be avoided.

10 Conceptual Framework (as applicable)

Conceptual Framework presents the proposed relationships among variables/ factors/ constructs usually through a conceptual model or diagram primarily used in quantitative studies. It serves as a roadmap for the study by illustrating how the variables are related and linking the literature review, methodology, data analysis and interpretations of findings. Conceptual framework should be logically derived from the existing literature and aligned with the research objectives and hypotheses. In relevant cases/studies, the conceptual framework may draw on the above theoretical framework and discussion.

11 Research Methodology

It is the overall methodological plan. It guides the conduct of the study, providing logical framework for addressing the research questions and achieving the study objectives by integrating the research philosophy, approach, methods, techniques and procedures.

11.1 Research Philosophy

Research philosophy is a set of beliefs/assumptions about nature of reality (ontology) and the nature of knowledge (epistemology), explaining how a researcher views the world and how knowledge can be generated and interpreted throughout the research process. Research philosophy imparts the paradigm of the research, e.g., Positivism, Interpretivism and Pragmatism. Positivism examines objectivity and quantifiable scientific truth, Interpretivism explores subjective, qualitative, and socially constructed meanings, and Pragmatism combines both to find practical solutions to real-world problems. (Note: Although these three represent major philosophical traditions, the researcher may explore other paradigms in consultation with the supervisor.

11.2 Research Approach

11.2.1 Deductive Approach

The study moves from theory to hypothesis to data. Data is collected, analysed and tested to confirm or reject the hypothesis.

[Theory- Hypotheses- Data Collection- Data Analyses- Confirmation or Rejection of Hypotheses].

11.2.2 Inductive Approach

The study moves from data to theory. Data is collected, themes and patterns are identified and based on the findings, concepts or theories are developed.

[Data Collection-Pattern Identification- Developing Themes/ Concepts-Developing Theory].

11.2.3 Abductive Approach

The study moves between data and theory. Unexpected findings are identified, possible explanations are developed, and the most suitable theory is selected.

[Data Collection – Identifying Patterns– Developing Explanations – Comparing with Existing Theories – Selecting the Most Suitable Theory]

11.3 Research Design

It is the core plan or blueprint for conducting a study, providing the logical framework for collecting, analysing, and interpreting data to address the research questions and achieve the study objectives.

11.4 Research Method

Research method refers to the overall type of inquiry adopted in a study. Depending on the research objectives, a study may be **quantitative**, **qualitative**, or **mixed methods** in nature.

11.4.1 Qualitative Research

Involves collecting and analysing non-numerical data to explore and understand concepts, experiences, opinions, behaviors, or social phenomena.

11.4.2 Quantitative Research

Involves collecting and analysing numerical data to measure variables, test hypotheses, examine relationships, and draw statistical inferences about a population.

11.4.3 Mixed Method Research

Involves collecting, analysing, and integrating both quantitative and qualitative data using an appropriate mixed method design to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

11.5 Study Area, Population and Unit of Analysis

This section logically describes and justifies the study location, target population and participants/respondents of the study. Exploratory, diagnostic, pure anthropological and traditional research, i.e., typology of the research influences selection of study areas and respondents.

11.6 Sampling Type and Technique, and Sample Size

Sample is a small representative part of a big population. Sampling is the procedure to select participants. This section describes the study participants or target population and the criteria for their selection.

11.6.1 Sampling Type and Techniques

11.6.1.1 Probability Sampling

A sampling method in which every member of the target population has a known chance of being selected. Common techniques include simple random, stratified, and cluster sampling.

11.6.1.2 Non-probability Sampling

A sampling method in which participants are selected based on convenience, researcher judgment, or specific characteristics rather than random selection. Common techniques include convenience and purposive sampling.

11.6.2 Sample Size Determination

For quantitative research, sample size should be determined using formula such as Cochran's formula, Yamane's Formula etc. On the other hand, sample size in the qualitative research depends on the data saturation level.

Note: There are various probability and non-probability sampling methods, each with its own procedures, assumptions, and suitability depending on the research objectives, study design, and characteristics of the target population.

11.7 Data Sources

Data sources are of two main types in research methodology i.e., primary and secondary sources.

11.7.1 Primary Sources

Original data collected directly by the researcher for the study, such as through survey, interview, observation, experiment, govt. gazettes or law.

11.7.2 Secondary Sources

Previous and existing data or information obtained from published or unpublished sources, such as journal articles, books, reports, documents, newspapers, databases, unpublished theses and organisational records etc.

11.8 Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Data collection methods refer to techniques or procedures used to gather data for the study.

11.8.1 Qualitative Methods and Instruments

Qualitative methods are used to collect non-numerical data to explore and understand experiences, perceptions, behaviours, and social phenomena. Common methods include in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), observations, document analysis, content analysis, case studies, and ethnography.

Qualitative instruments include Checklists, Interview questions, FGD Handouts/ Guide, Document Review Protocol etc. Researchers should justify the selection of the qualitative methods in relation to research objectives and questions and ensure that the selected methods are appropriate to the study design, and can provide credible and trustworthy findings.

11.8.2 Quantitative Methods and Instruments

Quantitative methods are used to collect numerical data for measuring variables, testing hypotheses, and examining relationships. Common methods include surveys, experiments, tests and measurements, cross-sectional studies, longitudinal studies, case-control studies, and cohort studies. Quantitative instruments include Questionnaire (Structured/ Semi-structured/Unstructured), Measurement Scale (e.g. Likert scale), Testing apparatus, Observation Checklists, cognitive test etc. Researchers should justify the selection of the quantitative methods in relation to research objectives and questions and ensure that the selected methods are appropriate to the study design, and capable of producing valid, reliable, and generalisable findings.

11.10 Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis procedure describes the methods and techniques used to organise, process, analyse, and interpret the collected data.

11.10.1 Qualitative Data Analysis Method

Usually, Thematic Analysis, Narrative Analysis, Discourse Analysis, Framework Analysis, Grounded Theory Analysis, Textual Analysis and so on are used for qualitative data analysis. Researchers may also employ any other relevant and appropriate data analysis method.

11.10.2 Quantitative Data Analysis Method

Usually, Correlation Analysis, Regression Analysis, PLS-SEM, CB-SEM, Factor Analysis, Multi-Level Modeling and so on are used for quantitative data analysis. Researchers may also employ any other relevant and appropriate data analysis method.

11.11 Validity and Reliability of Data

Validity and reliability of the data should be checked throughout the research process using appropriate statistical tools.

12 Ethical Considerations

This section describes the ethical principles and procedures that will be followed to protect the rights, dignity, privacy, and well-being of the participants. In the proposal seminar the researcher has to address issues such as informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, data protection, and approval from the relevant ethics review committee, where applicable.
Approval from Institutional Review Board (IRB) of BUP is compulsory for every researcher.

13 Scope and Limitations

13.1 Scope

The scope defines the boundaries and coverage of the study. It specifies the aspects, population, variables, context, geographical area, and time frame that the research will explore.

13.2 Limitations

The limitations acknowledge the constraints or factors beyond the researcher's control that may affect the conduct or findings of the study. Limitations also clarify the aspects that are outside the scope of the research and, therefore, are not addressed.

14 Significance/Contributions/Outcome of the Study

This section outlines the expected contributions and outcomes of the proposed research. It explains how the study will contribute to the advancement of theory, inform professional practice, support policy formulation and decision-making, benefit organisations or relevant stakeholders, and provide directions for future research.

15 Definitions and Operationalisation of Key Terms/ Concepts

This section provides clear and context-specific definitions of the key terms, concepts, or variables used in the study. The definitions explain how each term is understood, used, or applied within the context of the research to ensure clarity and consistency.

16 Tentative Chapter Outline

This section presents the proposed organisation of the thesis or dissertation by outlining the tentative chapters and their contents. It provides an overview of the structure of the study and composition of the research report:

Chapter 1: Introduction
Chapter 2: Literature Review and Framework of Study
Chapter 3: Research Methodology
Chapter 4: Findings and Interpretations
(As Applicable: Chapter may be more or less based on the study)
Chapter 5: Discussion and Analysis
(As Applicable: Chapter may be more or less based on the study)
Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

Note: Under the 'Tentative Chapter Outline' section of the research proposal, the researcher should provide only the proposed chapter titles, without any descriptive elaboration of their contents. Furthermore, it is important for researchers to remember that the research proposal must be organised section-wise rather than chapter-wise. Accordingly, *Introduction, Literature Review,*

Research Methodology, Findings and Interpretations, Discussion and Analysis, and *Conclusion and Recommendations* should be presented as sections of the proposal, not as chapters of the proposed thesis.

17 Timetable (Gantt Chart)
The timeline is typically presented in the form of a **Gantt Chart** or a detailed work plan, outlining the major tasks and the timeframe.

18 References
Latest editions of Harvard or APA referencing style should be used. For science and engineering, latest edition of IEEE can also be used.

19 Appendices
This section includes supporting materials relevant to the proposed study, such as the draft questionnaire, interview guide, observation checklist, informed consent form, ethical approval documents, photographs, and other supplementary documents.

***Note**: Researchers are expected to follow the Guideline when developing their proposals. However, CHSR allows reasonable flexibility to accommodate diverse research contexts, provided that academic rigour, methodological coherence, and research-specific requirements are maintained.*

20 Researcher's Short Biography

CHSR Guideline
Proposal Seminar of MPhil/ PhD (1st Seminar)
SUGGESTED CHAPTER OUTLINE

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1.4 Rationale of the Study
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    1.5.2 Specific Objectives
1.6 Research Question
    1.6.1 Primary Research Question
    1.6.2 Secondary Research Questions
1.7 Hypotheses
1.7.1 Null Hypotheses
1.7.2 Alternative Hypotheses
1.8 Scope and Limitations
1.8.1 Scope of the Study
1.8.2 Limitations of the Study
1.9 Definitions and Operationalisation of Key Terms/ Concepts
1.10 Chapterisation of Thesis
    Chapter 1: Introduction
    Chapter 2: Literature Review and Framework of Study
    Chapter 3: Research Methodology
    Chapter 4-6: Chapter Titles only as Applicable (Chapter may be more or less based on the study)
    Chapter 7: Conclusion
1.11 Concluding Remarks

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND FRAMEWORK OF STUDY

2.1 Introduction/ Prelude
2.2 Literature Review *(*As applicable from the following*)*
    2.2.1 Thematic Review
    2.2.2 Systematic Review
    2.2.3 Theoretical Review
    2.2.4 Empirical Review
2.3 Matrix of the Literature Review (Tabular) (Optional)
2.4 Research Gaps *(*Only relevant from the following to be covered*)*
    2.4.1 Knowledge Gap
    2.4.2 Methodological Gap
    2.4.3 Empirical Gap
    2.4.4 Contextual Gap
    2.4.5 Population Gap
    2.4.6 Conceptual Gap
    2.4.7 Theoretical Gap
2.5 Theoretical Framework (as applicable)
2.6 Conceptual Framework (as applicable)
2.7 Concluding Remarks

Note: Theoretical and conceptual frameworks can form a separate chapter called 'Framework'/ 'Theoretical and Conceptual Framework', considering the volume of either 'Literature Review' or 'Framework of the Study' chapter.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction/ Prelude
3.2 Research Methodology
    3.2.1 Research Philosophy/ Paradigm
3.3 Research Approach (Optional)
    3.3.1 Deductive Approach (for Quantitative Research)
    3.3.2 Inductive Approach (for Qualitative Research)
        (Both approaches can be used in mixed method research)
3.4 Research Design
    3.4.1 Research Methods (As applicable from the following)
        3.4.1.1 Qualitative Research
        3.4.1.2 Quantitative Research
        3.4.1.3 Mixed Methods Research
3.5 Study Area
3.6 Population/ Sample, Sampling Technique and Sample Size
    3.6.1 Population/Sample
    3.6.2 Sampling Techniques (As applicable)
        3.6.2.1 Probability Sampling
        3.6.2.2 Non-probability Sampling

3.6.3 Sample Size
3.7 Data Sources
3.7.1 Primary Sources
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3.8 Data Collection Methods and Instruments
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3.9 Data Collection Procedure (Description of the procedures of data to be collected)
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3.10.1 Qualitative Data Analysis Method
3.10.2 Quantitative Data Analysis Method
3.11 Ethical Considerations
3.12 Timetable
3.13 Significance/Contribution/Outcome of the Study
3.14 Concluding Remarks

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A Short Biography of Researcher

CHSR Guideline
Research Advancement Seminar (PhD 2nd Seminar)

The **PhD Advancement Seminar (2nd Seminar)** is intended to demonstrate the progress of the research, particularly in data collection, data analysis and interpretation, drawing inferences and findings, and discussing the results. At this stage, the researcher is expected to organise the thesis into chapters, with the contents structured as follows:

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1.7.2 Alternative Hypotheses
1.8 Scope and Limitations
1.8.1 Scope of the Study
1.8.2 Limitations of the Study
1.9 Definitions and Operationalisation of Key Terms/ Concepts
1.10 Concluding Remarks

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND FRAMEWORK OF STUDY

2.1 Introduction/ Prelude
2.2 Literature Review *(*As applicable from the following*)*
- 2.2.1 Thematic Review
- 2.2.2 Systematic Review
- 2.2.3 Theoretical Review
- 2.2.4 Empirical Review

2.3 Matrix of the Literature Review (Tabular) (Optional)
2.4 Research Gaps *(*Only relevant from the following to be covered*)*
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- 2.4.3 Empirical Gap
- 2.4.4 Contextual Gap
- 2.4.5 Population Gap
- 2.4.6 Conceptual Gap
- 2.4.7 Theoretical Gap

2.5 Theoretical Framework (as applicable)
2.6 Conceptual Framework (as applicable)
2.7 Concluding Remarks

Note: Theoretical and conceptual frameworks can form a separate chapter called 'Framework'/ 'Theoretical and Conceptual Framework', considering the volume of either 'Literature Review' or 'Framework of the Study' chapter.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction/ Prelude
3.2 Research Methodology
- 3.2.1 Research Philosophy/ Paradigm

3.3 Research Approach (Optional)
- 3.3.1 Deductive Approach (for Quantitative Research)
- 3.3.2 Inductive Approach (for Qualitative Research)

(Both approaches can be used in mixed method research)

3.4 Research Design
- 3.4.1 Research Methods (As applicable from the following)
  - 3.4.1.1 Qualitative Research
  - 3.4.1.2 Quantitative Research
  - 3.4.1.3 Mixed Methods Research

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- 3.6.1 Population/Sample
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3.8.2 Quantitative Methods and Instruments
3.9 Data Collection Procedure (Description of the procedures of data to be collected)
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3.10.1 Qualitative Data Analysis Method
3.10.2 Quantitative Data Analysis Method
3.11 Ethical Considerations
3.12 Timetable
3.13 Significance/Contribution/Outcome of the Study
3.14 Concluding Remarks

CHAPTER 4 TO CHAPTER 6: AS APPLICABLE

For Quantitative Research

- **Chapter 4** Results or Findings (What was found?)
- **Chapter 5** Data Analysis/Interpretations (What do the findings indicate?)
- **Chapter 6** Discussion (Why/how do the findings matter?)

For Qualitative Research

Chapter titles should be formed thematically based on research objectives which would incorporate Results/ Findings, Data Analysis/Interpretations, and Discussion in the relevant chapter.

References
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A Short Biography of Researcher

CHSR Guideline
Research Pre-defence Seminar
MPhil (2nd Seminar)/ PhD 3rd Seminar

The **Pre-defence Seminar** demonstrates the researcher's preparedness to defend the thesis and confirms that the study has achieved its objectives, maintaining academic, methodological, and ethical rigour. The seminar presents the complete thesis, comprising all five or six chapters, incorporating the revisions made following the Advancement Seminar. This seminar presents the complete thesis, including all previous chapters, and the last chapter i.e., generally titled 'Conclusion and Recommendations' along with references and appendices.

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1.10 Concluding Remarks

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- 2.2.2 Systematic Review
- 2.2.3 Theoretical Review
- 2.2.4 Empirical Review

2.3 Matrix of the Literature Review (Tabular) (Optional)
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- 2.4.5 Population Gap
- 2.4.6 Conceptual Gap
- 2.4.7 Theoretical Gap

2.5 Theoretical Framework (as applicable)
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  - 3.4.1.2 Quantitative Research
  - 3.4.1.3 Mixed Methods Research

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- 3.6.1 Population/Sample
- 3.6.2 Sampling Techniques (As applicable)
  - 3.6.2.1 Probability Sampling
  - 3.6.2.2 Non-probability Sampling
- 3.6.3 Sample Size

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3.12 Timetable
3.13 Significance/Contribution/Outcome of the Study
3.14 Concluding Remarks

CHAPTER 4 TO CHAPTER 6: AS APPLICABLE

For Quantitative Research

- **Chapter 4** Results or Findings (What was found?)
- **Chapter 5** Data Analysis/Interpretations (What do the findings indicate?)
- **Chapter 6** Discussion (Why/how do the findings matter?)

For Qualitative Research

Chapter titles should be formed thematically based on research objectives which would incorporate Results/ Findings, Data Analysis/Interpretations, and Discussion in the relevant chapter.

CHAPTER 7 or 8 (Last Chapter) CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Introduction/Prelude
7.2 Summary of Findings (as applicable)
7.3 Recommendations (as applicable)
7.4 Significance/ Contribution/ Outcome of the study
7.5 Future Research Directions
7.6 Conclusion

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DEFENCE (VIVA VOCE)

The Defence (Viva Voce) is the final oral examination of the MPhil/PhD programme. The researcher presents and defends the complete thesis before the Examination Committee. The Committee evaluates the originality, methodological rigour, ethical compliance, and the researcher's understanding of the study. The Defence determines whether the thesis meets the requirements for the award of the MPhil or PhD degree.

Presentation on Defence

During presentation in defence, the researcher needs to address the following-

1. Problem Statement,
2. Research Questions,
3. Objectives,
4. Hypotheses (if any)
5. Research Methodology
    - 5.1 Research Design/ Approach
    - 5.2 Methods: Quantitative/Qualitative/Mixed
    - 5.3 Data collection Methods & Tools/ Instruments
    - 5.4 Population, Sampling and Sample Size
    - 5.5 Theoretical Framework
    - 5.6 Conceptual Framework
6. Findings and Interpretations
7. Discussion and Analysis
8. Recommendations
9. Question-Answer Session

ANNEX

Research Proposal Guidelines: Oxford, Cambridge, and Harvard

#	Topic	Oxford	Cambridge	Harvard
1	Title of the Research	Expected as a working title framing the proposal; not separately regulated by central guidance.	Not addressed as a distinct topic in departmental guidance; implicit in the "Research Topic" opening.	No title requirement for the Statement of Purpose. At the later dissertation prospectus stage, a provisional/working title is typically expected.
2	Abstract	Not a standard proposal section - Oxford proposals open directly with the research question.	Not a standard section in the departmental guidance reviewed.	Not part of the SOP. General Harvard proposal-writing guidance (grant/GSD context) treats the abstract as identifying the key question, methodology, deliverables, and relevance to the funder - sometimes drafted last even though it is read first.
3	Introduction	Core opening move: state the research question(s) as succinctly as possible, framed around an intellectual problem, paradox, or debate.	Opens with "Research Topic" - briefly outline the area and topic of the research.	SOP: reasons, motivation, and research interests stated early. Prospectus: a thesis statement, an argument for the subject's importance, an overview of prior work, and the chosen methodological approach.
4	Background of the Study	Woven into the introduction/context rather than given a separate heading.	Covered by "Research Context" - relating the proposed research to other work in the field.	Prospectus stage: expected to describe the general context of the project.
5	Statement of the Problem	Same intellectual-problem framing used in the introduction; Oxford does not separate the two.	Implicit within Research Topic/Context; not a distinct heading in the guidance reviewed.	Central to both the SOP and the prospectus; prospectus guides stress justifying the importance of the subject.
6	Literature Review	Built into "Research Goals and Methods": a discussion of relevant existing scholarship and theoretical approaches	Distinct expectation - assessors want to see what's already known, who the key scholars are, and	Not a labeled SOP section (shown instead via the writing sample); the prospectus requires a fuller review

#	Topic	Oxford	Cambridge	Harvard
		within an interdisciplinary framework.	what debates warrant further investigation.	positioning the project against existing scholarship.
7	Research Questions	Explicit and central - proposals are expected to state RQs directly in the introduction.	Addressed indirectly through Research Topic/Context; not a separate RQ heading.	Prospectus stage: Harvard Psychology guidance directs students to pose the specific research question and hypothesize expected results.
8	Research Objectives	Explicit "Research Goals and Methods" section - outline the main goals and approaches to be used.	Not a separately labeled section; folded into Research Topic/Context.	SOP includes career objectives (personal, not project objectives); the prospectus implies project objectives via the thesis statement.
9	Hypotheses	Optional - Oxford guidance (e.g., QEH) lists an outline of the initial argument or hypotheses as one structural element.	Not a standard requirement; more common only in strongly quantitative proposals.	Explicit in science/social-science prospectuses - e.g., Psychology program guidance requires hypothesizing expected results.
10	Theoretical Framework	Explicit - outline theoretical approaches in the topic and indicate which will be used and why.	Less standardized at proposal stage; sometimes folded into "Contribution to Knowledge."	Not a standard labeled SOP section; expected within the prospectus's argument, but without a fixed heading in Harvard guidance reviewed.
11	Conceptual Framework	Not typically separated from "Theoretical Framework" in official Oxford guidance reviewed.	Not a distinct heading in the Cambridge guidance reviewed.	Not a distinct heading in the Harvard guidance reviewed - across all three, this tends to be a discipline/supervisor preference rather than an institutional requirement.
12	Rationale of the Study	Embedded in the intellectual-problem framing and the originality evaluation criterion.	Closest equivalent is the "Contribution to Knowledge" section.	GSD proposal guidance frames this as tying the project to institutional/funding goals and explaining why the research matters and why the applicant is positioned to do it.
13	Significance / Contribution / Outcome	Assessed directly - originality and how the analysis will bear on the research questions or contribute to the subject	Explicit dedicated section: "Contribution to Knowledge."	GSD guidance names "deliverables" and relevance to institutional/funding goals as required elements.

#	Topic	Oxford	Cambridge	Harvard
		area is a required element.		
14	Research Methodology	Dedicated “Research Methods” section - explain how the research will be conducted and the practical/theoretical approaches taken.	Dedicated “Methodology” section; applicants should explain anything striking about their methodological choice.	GSD guidance: dedicated methodology section explaining how evidence will be gathered and analyzed and why; the prospectus requires full methodological detail.
15	Ethical Considerations	Required where relevant - explain considerations such as confidentiality and power; all researchers must complete the CUREC checklist and obtain permission before fieldwork.	Required for sensitive/participant-based research - explain adherence to data protection law, informed consent, and participants' right to withdraw; reviewed by departmental ethics committees or the HSS REC.	Not a fixed SOP section. Ethics review (institutional/departmental, discipline-specific) is handled later, tied to the specific research design at the prospectus/committee stage.
16	Scope and Limitations	Implicit in the feasibility criterion (completable within three to four years) rather than a labeled section.	Not a distinct labeled section in the guidance reviewed.	Prospectus stage: explicit - Harvard programs advise discussing the scope of the research with a mentor, and general Harvard writing guidance stresses setting limits on scope early.
17	Definitions of Key Terms	Not a standard required section in the Oxford departmental guidance reviewed.	Not a standard required section in the guidance reviewed.	Not a standard required section in the guidance reviewed - across all three, this tends to be discipline-specific rather than institutionally mandated.
18	Tentative Chapter Outline	Explicitly recommended - helps demonstrate commitment to the research, though it is not binding.	Not a standard proposal-stage requirement in the Cambridge guidance reviewed.	Central to the prospectus - e.g., Romance Languages guidance recommends outlining a sequence of potential chapters to clarify the thesis's argument and check the balance of its parts.

#	Topic	Oxford	Cambridge	Harvard
19	Timeline	Recommended - map out a reasonable schedule to monitor progress and manage the project.	Not explicitly detailed in the general guidance reviewed, though feasibility is an implicit expectation.	Prospectus stage: explicit - Harvard writing guidance recommends breaking the project into manageable pieces with a timeline for each task.
20	References / Bibliography	Required, excluded from the word count, following department-specific referencing style.	Included via "Sources and Resources"; whether it counts toward the word limit varies by department.	Not required for the SOP. The prospectus requires one - GSD prospectus guidance specifies a selected bibliography of primary and secondary sources spanning two to four additional pages.
21	Appendices	Not typical at the initial-proposal stage (proposals are short and word-capped).	Cambridge's word-limit policy confirms appendices are excluded from the thesis word count, implying they are permitted in the full thesis rather than the short admissions proposal.	Permitted and common at the prospectus stage - Harvard Psychology notes a typical prospectus runs up to 30 pages, excluding appendices.