

How to apply for a research degree

If you are applying for a research degree (MSc, MRes, MPhil, PhD) at the University of Warwick you will have to complete the Academic Interests and Purpose of Study section on the application form which states:

“Please use this space to describe your special academic interests and your purpose and objective in undertaking graduate study.

If you are applying for a research degree, please state the proposed research subject as accurately as possible (i.e. thesis topic). Then amplify your research proposal and give details of publications and any other research experience and/or relevant preliminary reading you have already undertaken. Additionally, please indicate whether you have discussed your proposed research with a member of the academic staff at Warwick and if so please name the academic concerned. Continue on a separate sheet if necessary. Some departments may require a more detailed proposal.”

Most of the rejections which we make in the Department of Computer Science are because this section is not completed correctly. It is the intention of this document to explain what you should and should not do.

Do not

Do not submit a Personal Statement for this section. It is not helpful for us to receive a long document about how well you have done at school, that you have received more A grades than anyone else you know, and that it is your dream to study at the University of Warwick.

There are a number of other sections on the application form which allow you to demonstrate how good your grades have been. It is therefore not appropriate for you to duplicate all this material in the section on Academic Interests and Purpose of Study.

Do not give a running commentary on your life history. Neither is this the place to discuss how well you did to get your current job/scholarship/academic medal etc.

This type of information is not useful in the context of the section on your Academic Interests and Purpose of Study. It provides no information on your thesis

topic, publications, research experience etc. Worse still, it usually discourages the person reading your application and it will move quickly to the ‘reject’ pile.

If you do describe your research interests then do not make sweeping statements like ‘I want to research Software Engineering’ and leave it at that. Statements like this are also very unhelpful. Software Engineering is a very large field, like macro-economics or statistics or environmental modelling. Software Engineering contains a number of sub-fields including Human Factors, Software Specification, Software Design, Programming, Software Validation, Software Management, Security, etc. Assuming that you know something about the subject, your planned research will be in one of these specific sub-fields.

What is required?

So if this section is not asking for a personal statement then what is required exactly? This is where you need to go back to the description given at the start of the section on Academic Interests and Purpose of Study

“Please state the proposed research subject as accurately as possible”

In order to do this you need to do some research. Let’s say for example that you are interested in Software Engineering. Next you need to identify what sub-field you want to work in, maybe this is Software Management for example. Then you need to think about which part of Software Management you are interested in, Software Cost Estimation perhaps... By doing this you make it easier for the academics in the department to identify what subject you are excited by, and what subject you are willing to dedicate yourself to for the next 1, 2 or 3 years.

If you are interested in some specific topic then you have probably arrived at this interest through some associated literature. Maybe you have read the papers on Software Cost Estimation by Boehm and you think that the methods are no longer appropriate; you might suggest some alternative approaches and state why you think they may work.

“Indicate whether you have discussed your proposed research with a member of academic staff”

Once you have identified the area in which you want to work, you will need

to see if this matches the interests of the academics in the department to which you are applying. You should look on the department web pages and identify the areas of research and then see if they match your own. If they do not match then you are probably applying to the wrong department/university and you should consider whether your application is well placed. We reject a lot of applications because there is ‘no suitable supervisor in the department’.

If your academic interests do match those of an academic then you should contact them via email. You should state the field in which you are interested and what you hope to do in your research degree. If the academic is interested in your application they will usually reply.

“Amplify your research proposal and give details of publications and other research experience”

If you have done any work in the area in which you are planning on researching, then this should be clearly stated. This might include final year projects, articles for magazines, full academic reports etc. If you have not written anything then don’t worry, but don’t bluff. We are not interested in which Microsoft Certificates you have taken or whether you can use Excel.

It is likely that you do have some experience which will support your application. Taking the Software Engineering example still further, you may have some programming skills, you may have worked on some large projects, you may have produced software specifications or tested software etc. Such detail would add a useful extra paragraph to your application. However, be careful not to let it replace the part on the proposed research subject.

Finally when you have produced your document you might like to send it to the academic whom you have consulted to see whether it is the sort of proposal which they might be interested in. You might find that you go through one or two drafts before you get it right. Only when you are both happy should you submit your final application.

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