

A BRIEF TAXONOMY OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE RESEARCH PROPOSAL AT THE CAPE PENINSULA UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY (CPUT)

By MS Bayat*

ABSTRACT

This article explains a number of general observations about academic research and research in general. An in-depth discussion of the institutional research proposal follows, including reference to the requirements of the Higher Degrees Committee (HDC) as well as the general format that is used by the institution for research proposals. Particular attention is devoted to the format of the proposal, such as the title, the problem statement, the key questions, the objectives of the research, the significance of the research, demarcation of the study field and a glossary of terms. Mention is made of the literature search and extracting of normative criteria from the literature as part of theory discovery. The empirical survey is explained, including methods of data collection, questionnaires, the total research population (universe), the target population (the sample) and the response population (the number of respondents that completed the questionnaire). Reference is made of statistical analysis, interpretation of the results of the statistical analysis as well as the description of the findings.

The programme of study is briefly referred to, as well as a number of suggestions to simplify the research process for the novice researcher.

INTRODUCTION

Research has a direct effect on the clothes one wears, the food one eats and the car, bus, train or aircraft in which one travels. Computer micro-chips, robots, “test tube” babies, lunar modules, satellites and video recorders all came about from decisions based on research results. There are few areas in modern life which have not been touched by research.

Major decisions which affect people’s lives are based on research results from research projects conducted in both private and public sectors. These decisions range from the type of education one generation receives to the changes in value systems from generation to generation.

Most products and processes used in commerce and industry are research-based.

Billions of rands are spent on research globally. Large firms have their own research development departments and governments rely on their own and sponsored research to answer questions ranging from the efficiency of weaponry to poverty eradication initiatives.

Academic research is an integral part of higher education. Since existing knowledge renews itself every few months, no academic can afford to ignore the need and necessity for doing constant research.

At the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, research is one of the three pillars enshrined in the institutional mission, which reads as follows:

... our mission is to develop and sustain an empowering environment where, through teaching, learning, research and scholarship our students and staff, in partnership with the community and industry are able to create and apply knowledge that contributes to development . . .

This article will explain the various components of a research proposal as prescribed by CPUT, with particular reference to the requirement set by the Research Department, including various requirements set by the Higher Degrees Committee of CPUT (HDC).

The article will be concluded with a number of recommendations, followed by a conclusion and a bibliography, as well as Annexure “A”, “Application for Acceptance of Proposal” form.

THE RESEARCH PROPOSAL

According to the *Faculty of Business Guidelines for Advanced Studies* (2007:39), the purpose of a research proposal (also known as a “protocol”) is to establish that the student has a viable and researchable problem and an acceptable plan of action for undertaking the intended research. At that stage, sufficient preparation and spadework should already have been done in order to establish that there are adequate grounds for embarking on the project and that there is a good chance of successfully completing it. The order of the layout as given below may be changed and certain sections may be combined, or additional features added. The suggested headings are to serve as road signs to clearly indicate to the evaluator what the research problem is, how the candidate intends doing the research, as well as what the intended outcomes could be.

The requirements for an acceptable research proposal can rely on research based on generally accepted scientific norms. A research proposal usually includes the following:

- The title.
- Statement of the main research problem and possible sub-problems.
- Posing a number of key questions.
- The objectives of the research.
- Hypothesis(es).
- Delimitation of the research.
- Definition of concepts.
- The significance of the research.
- Research methodology, which includes:
 - review of relevant literature.
 - brief description of the empirical survey
 - brief description of the statistical analysis
 - brief description of the interpretation of the findings and the description and presentation thereof.
- Envisaged programme of study.
- Bibliography.
- Annexures (optional).

(Adapted from the CPUT Research Guide (2006:1–4)).

Each of the above proposal components will be described in more detail below as adapted from the *Faculty of Business Guidelines for Advanced Studies* (2007:39–43) .

*** The title**

Has to be concise, encapsulating the essence of the research without being cumbersome or grammatically incorrect. Key words should be selected that can be recognised as acceptable terminology in terms of information retrieval systems. Avoid meaningless statements such as:

“An investigation into the possibility of conducting researching in . . .”

*** Statement of the main research problem and possible sub-problems**

As research is usually problem-centred, according to the *Faculty of Business Guidelines for Advanced Studies* (2007:39–43), the statement of the main research problem is the heart of the proposal. Usually a single sentence is all that is needed to describe succinctly what the basic problem is. Often, students have difficulty in describing the problem. Instead they list objectives, outcomes, needs or other aspects that are not relevant to describing the problem. If the research problem is not accurately described against the background set by the title, it is likely that the application will be returned. The National Research Foundation (NRF) has reported that most research proposals they see are:

haracterised by poorly formulated problems.

The NRF states that:

researchers often indulge in jargon, which seems to obscure rather than explain what the research problem is

According to Brynard and Hanekom (1997:11), research entails the identification of a specific topic which needs to be investigated, or a problem that needs to be studied and, if possible, solved. The statement of the problem is the core of any research. Brynard and Hanekom (1997:11) argues that research commences with the selection of a general field of study, which has to be “reduced” to a specific problem relating to it.

Bless and Higson-Smith (1995:21–22 as cited in Brynard and Hanekom (1997:11), hold that a number of factors are prominent in determining the suitability of a research problem. The more of these criteria are met, the more suitable the selected problem. The criteria are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 — source: Bless and Higson-Smith (1995:21–22 as cited in Brynard and Hanekom (1997:11))

Timeousness	Identification should not take place after the problem has escalated to a point where it is unlikely that the research findings will contribute to solving the problem or to preventing the further escalation of the problem.
Relative to a practical problem	The problem should reside in a situation experienced in real life, not an imaginary, flight of fancy scenario.
Relative to a definite population	The problem should be experienced by a specific, easily definable group.
Fill a gap in existing knowledge	The results of the research should contribute towards better insight into, and a broadening of a specific area of knowledge.
Possesses practical value	The application of the recommendations, based on the findings of the research, should contribute towards rectifying an existing, unacceptable situation.
Clearly demarcated	The research should be manageable in order to enable the researcher(s) to focus on a specific problem, taking into account available time, finance, sample size and abilities of the researcher.
Empirically testable	The problem statement should be based on verifiable empirical facts obtained by studying reality.

Research usually starts with a question in the researcher’s mind. It is this question which usually leads to a researchable problem. Research starts with the delimitation and description of a problem. This is where many inexperienced researchers founder. Research based on a poorly formulated statement of the problem or without such a statement at all is probably not going to progress and this leads to frustration and a waste of time and money.

The problem statement, according to Goddard and Melville (2001:16) is the base on which the eventual report will stand, and needs to be clear and coherent. The statement of the problem will ask a question or questions, usually about the relationships between variables; be empirically verifiable or falsifiable, for example testable in the real world and will also be testable within the time, budget, experience and resource constraints of the researcher, while also defining the usefulness of the results of the research (Goddard & Melville, 2001:16).

According to Bless and Higson-Smith (2000:142), the problem to be dealt with is introduced by quoting authoritative sources to assess current knowledge levels about the particular issue, what is still not clear and what needs further investigation, including the relevance of such investigation.

How does the inexperienced researcher identify a research problem?

According to Bless and Higson-Smith (2000:16), one can distinguish three steps in identifying a research problem. These are as indicated below.

1. The selection of the topic area.
2. The selection of a general problem.

3. The reduction of the general problem to one or more specific, precise and well delimited questions.

In order to achieve the above steps, the following hints could be applied:

- Analyse what is known, including the historical record.
- Look for gaps or deficiencies in explanations — that is, for “areas of darkness”.
- Watch for incongruities and contradictions, the points of controversy, the untested conclusions.
- Follow clues and suggestions obtained from reading, conferences, and thinking.

According to Goddard and Melville (2001:12), problems can be identified in prior research, specific needs of industries, institutions, countries, groups and individuals, in new opportunities as well as in intellectual curiosity.

The above sources of research problems, as explained by Goddard and Melville (2001:14), are major ways in which researchers can generate ideas for topics of research. In order to decide on a good topic, the researcher must first have a substantial knowledge of the field in question and of current developments in that field. This knowledge is usually acquired via a literature study of available books and other sources on the relevant topic.

From the above, it can be inferred that a golden rule is to state exactly what one means and to say it in as few words as possible. To formulate a problem statement correctly at the first attempt is exceptional. As is the case with all other aspects of research, the statement of a problem requires some effort. The researcher must be prepared to formulate and reformulate his problem.

Students should ensure that **the problem** remains foremost in their thinking and writing, and they should continuously focus on it and the objectives.

The statement of sub-problems involves usually that the main research problem can be sub-divided into a number of sub-problems, which emanate from the main research problem. These should be limited to two, or three, but they can be described in more detail, approximately one paragraph per sub-problem.

*** Posing a number of key questions**

These questions emanate from the problem statement and will precede the hypothesis(es), which attempts to provide answers to each of the key questions posed in this section as well as prepare the ground work for the research objective and/or research goals.

Usually, three or four key questions are adequate for the purposes of the research proposal (Ferreira, 2005:1).

*** The objectives of the research**

Clarify what the aims and objectives of this research are. Where feasible, objectives should be divided into main and subsidiary objectives. They should be numbered to facilitate the planning process. The NRF Research Review Guidelines specifically evaluate whether the objectives are well articulated and whether they are realistic and attainable. In writing the proposal, students should continually relate their report to the objectives of the research; i.e., remain focused on the objectives (*Faculty of Business Guidelines for Advanced Studies, 2007:39–43*).

*** Hypothesis**

In this section, brief hypothesis(es) can be provided as possible answers to the key questions posed above as well as to prepare the groundwork for the research objective and/or research goals.

The hypothesis is optional, since its application is more commonly found in the exact sciences. To hypothesise or not should be decided on in consultation with the statistician (see section on statistical analysis).

*** Delimitation of the research**

This entails the clarification of what the various boundaries of the research will be. What aspects will not be covered by the research, for example, *inter alia* a study of engineering firms that have

fewer than 500 employees; only plants that grow in the Western Cape; a study of patients in clinics and hospitals in the Witwatersrand area, only 220v AC systems (*Faculty of Business Guidelines for Advanced Studies*, 2007:39–43).

According to Goddard and Melville (2001:14), the process of demarcation indicates what the researcher wishes to include in the research by determining the scope of the study, what variables are involved, how the research will be pursued and what practical constraints are involved.

It is necessary for the researcher to indicate what is not to be included in the research project (Leedy, 1980:60). The researcher cannot possibly include all the aspects of the research problem in the project. Inexperienced researchers are inclined to fall into the trap of attempting too wide an investigation.

It can be tempting to research matters on the periphery of the central problem. Such investigations, although they may be of significance as far as other projects are concerned, are a waste of time and distract the researcher from his actual research problem. The exact boundaries of the problem must be stated.

*** Definition of concepts**

The same words may have different meanings to different people, especially if they work in different disciplines. List and clarify/define the main words and concepts that you will be using in the research.

According to the Research guide, (CPUT: 2006, pp 1–4), a glossary of concepts in a research document enables the researcher to communicate his or her interpretation of the key issues of the research to other scientists and interested parties. This has to be provided, as the terminology used by the researcher may be interpreted in different ways by other scientists.

A number of definitions of what a glossary is, with sources, are provided below (from the *Faculty of Business Guidelines for Advanced Studies*, 2007:39–43).

- an alphabetical list of technical terms in some specialised field of knowledge; usually published as an appendix to a text on that field wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn
- This is a list of glossaries (pages containing terms and their definitions or explanations). See also wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary
- Short list of words related to a specific topic, with brief definitions, arranged alphabetically and often placed at the end of a book www.usd.edu/library/instruction/glossary.shtml
- An alphabetical listing of special terms as they are used in a particular subject area, often with more in-depth explanations than would customarily be provided by dictionary definitions. www.brochure-design.com/brochure-design-publishing-terms.html
- A list of questionable definitions. www.mizushobai.freemove.co.uk/glossary.htm
- An alphabetical list of terms, limited to a special area of knowledge, with accompanying definitions. www.isu.edu/library/research/glossary.htm
- An alphabetical list of abstruse, obsolete, unusual, technical, or other terms concerned with a subject field, together with definitions. libweb.hawaii.edu/uhtmlib/collection/glossary.html
- To search for a particular term, go to Edit > Find at the top of your browser and type in the term you're looking for. www.ctri.wisc.edu/Home/Glossary.html
- A list of terms and definitions particular to the subject of the book. www.bookjobs.com/page.php
- A list of words and their meanings. www.clpgh.org/exhibit/gloss.html

It is imperative that the researcher defines the terminology appearing in the title, the statement of the problem and sub-problems with precision. Without knowing the exact meaning of a term the research cannot be evaluated properly, and it will be impossible to determine whether the researcher has duly solved his or her problem. Terminology must be defined in an operational way; i.e., the definition must define the term as it is used in the research project. The researcher must therefore define the term according to the meaning he or she wishes to attach to it in that

specific research project. Terms with obvious meanings need not be defined. Terms with a special meaning or those that can have different meanings in the specific field of study must be defined. Where possible the researcher must use authoritative sources when defining terms (Research guide, CPUT: 2006, pp 1–4).

*** The significance of the research.**

According to de Vos et al. (2002:118), it must be demonstrated that the research will be useful in three broad areas as explained below.

- The research must contribute to existing knowledge.
- The relevant area of study should find usefulness and meaning in the study.
- The study should be useful for practitioners.

The relative emphasis placed on each aspect of the study's significance depends on the study itself. De Vos et al. (2000:118) further assert that the researcher has to ensure that the section on significance of the research spells out not only the immediate, but also longer term benefits that the results of the study may bring to various target groups of possible beneficiaries. The contribution that the study can make to the development of the theoretical base of the relevant profession should also be stated in this context.

*** Research methodology, which includes**

– review of relevant literature.

According to Ferreira (2005:1), this entails a study of relevant books, journal articles, academic papers, official reports, government policy, such as legislation and subordinate legislation, minutes of meetings, official publications and other policy documents, newspaper articles, unpublished research and other applicable published and unpublished material.

According to Fox and Bayat (2007:35), a literature search is a critical assessment and summary of the range of past and contemporary literature in a given area of knowledge. The literature search may be restricted to formal documents or papers and books written on one discipline or sub-discipline, or it may be wider-ranging within another discipline or sub-discipline. The purposes and aims of literature searches may be summarised as follows:

- To provide a sound theoretical overview of the existing research findings, theories and models in terms of the specific research problem.
- To indicate to the reader that the researcher is familiar with recent research developments.
- To show that the researcher had been selective and critical in listing only relevant research findings.
- To provide insight into previous work.
- To situate and locate the research project and outline of the work.
- To show the supervisor that the researcher is comfortable with existing, current, relevant data on the research topic (Fox & Bayat, 2007:36).

According to Fox and Bayat (2007:36), a literature search forms a significant part of any research project. From the researcher's point of view, the literature search serves several purposes, examples of which are provided in the paragraphs that follow:

- A literature search assists the researcher to become acquainted with the past and latest developments in the field of the project. In the majority of cases it may appear that the research is unique until a comprehensive literature search has been done and it is then revealed that the research has been undertaken before.
- A literature search assists the researcher in understanding the facts and theories in the chosen field. It also provides a conceptual frame of reference that may be used to evaluate the researcher's own research and research results.
- By examining existing literature on the topic, the researcher gains insight into various approaches to conducting the research, what the best methods and techniques are, what problems were encountered, what mistakes were made and what successes were achieved.

- A literature search assists in interpreting one's own research and in determining the relationship between the research and existing knowledge in the field, thereby contributing to developments and increasing knowledge in the research area.
- One should be able to gain a better idea of what should and what could be done in terms of the research, thereby discovering on which aspects of the study field to focus in order to meet the research objectives (Fox & Bayat, 2007:36).

A literature search is undertaken by the researcher to inform/educate him or herself about the existing literature on the research topic.

Extracting relevant and particular normative criteria from the literature pertaining to the stated research problem is a step in the literature review process that focuses and concretises the essence of what was found in the literature in a coherent and comprehensive description of selected normative criteria as found in the literature. Such normative criteria are extracted from the literature, indicating knowledge and understanding on the part of the researcher of the research topic, the research problem and other relevant matters. This has to be briefly explained in the research proposal.

According to the *Faculty of Business Guidelines for Advanced Studies* (2007:39–43), an adequate literature study is required in all proposals (protocols), especially where funding is required. The purposes of the literature study are to provide evidence to the research committee that the student is well acquainted with past and current research in the particular field of study; that the study will not duplicate past or current research; as well as indicating how the intended research fits in with related and past research. In addition to indicating how the literature supports the need for research in this particular field, some faculties also require the student to provide an indication from the literature in respect of what related aspects require further research. A recent NRF report relating to the evaluation of research proposals points out that the literature reviews “must provide a rationale for the choice of problem, or a theoretical framework for the study”, and that too often this is missing. In the final dissertation a much more complete and extensive literature study will have to be presented than that which is acceptable for the protocol. The NRF report furthermore points out that too often the literature review does not correspond with the aims of the research. A specific comment of NRF evaluators is that many students “took the review of literature as a perfunctory task and therefore there was no contribution to or advancement of the intellectual debate”. It was found that students who commenced research without first having completed a thorough literature study normally experienced problems. References such as the following should be consulted: Union catalogue of theses and dissertations of South African universities, Dissertations abstracts international, Index to theses with abstracts, etc. Students who wish to apply for NRF funds must produce evidence that they have completed a NEXUS and/or NAVTEC data search. It is strongly recommended that students who undertake a literature search seek the advice and help of a subject librarian to assist them in searching the various Internet search engines. Students should also include a brief section indicating what searches have been done, what key words have been used, and what databases or search engines have been used. This is particularly important where the available references are rather sparse. The Harvard system of bibliographic citation should be used, unless a specific department specifies otherwise.

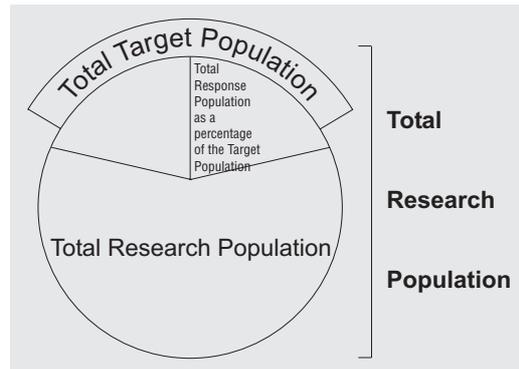
– brief description of the empirical survey

The word “empirical” means “guided by practical experience”. An empirical survey constitutes a second data stream in a research project. A research project is augmented by an empirical survey of a representative sample of a given research population and where the practical area pertaining to the research is investigated by various means of data collection, for example a questionnaire.

The research population is categorised into three components (see illustration below):

- (i) Description of the **Total** possible research population, or “universe”.
- (ii) Identification of the **Target** research population, which, in collaboration with the supervisors

- and the statistician, can be any pre-determined percentage of a scientifically acceptable representative sample of the **Total** research population mentioned in item (i).
- (iii) A statement to the effect that a final **Response** population figure will be decided on in collaboration with the supervisors and the statistician, which, at the time, represents a given percentage of the **Target** population, which responses will be the subject of the statistical analysis (see illustration below).



Source: Ferreira (CPUT:2005:3).

An empirical survey is conducted among the **Target** population (see (ii) above) in the form of a (usually self-administered) questionnaire consisting of dependent and independent variables, structured in a quantitative/qualitative (or both) research approach (representing a closed and/or open-ended format, respectively) and predetermined in collaboration with a registered statistician.

The theory of questionnaire design is briefly explained, as well as basic concepts pertaining to the researcher's attitude towards the research, such the ethics of research and the element of BIAS.

– brief description of the statistical analysis

Appropriate response percentages are determined in collaboration with a registered statistician by determining relative values from the empirical data and transferring such values in a codified form to a computer database. The data thus analysed are interpreted by utilising selected statistical methods and analytical instruments. A description of the analysis methodology design should be provided in a separate chapter on the research methodology. In the case of a quantitative survey approach, the relevant numerical evaluation scale (for example, Likert and/or Thurston scales) should be fully described. In the case of a qualitative approach being followed, the methods of determining analysable trends in the responses should be fully described. This can only take place in consultation with a registered statistician (Ferreira, 2005:4).

– brief description of the interpretation of the findings and the description and presentation thereof

After receiving the statistical analysis of the empirical data from the registered statistician, the results should be interpreted meaningfully by the researcher and the findings in terms of the various analytical instruments expressed and described by the researcher by way of tables, charts and figures, followed by a brief textual explanation of each and every analysis event. A brief reference to the various statistical analysis instruments envisaged should be provided in chapter one. In the separate chapter on research design, figures, tables and charts can be used to clarify descriptions of findings (Ferreira, 2005:4).

Envisaged programme of study

Not only is a time schedule of the intended programme of study required in this section, but also an exposition, chapter-wise, of the envisaged paper/dissertation.

* Bibliography

This is a list of the literature that has been referred to in the proposal. Titles that have no relevance to the research should not be listed. The Harvard referencing system should at all times be used.

* Possible annexures, also known as appendices.

Appendices should be kept to a minimum, although their inclusion can enhance the research.

* Summary

This section summarises in a nutshell what appears in the proposal. It may not provide new material by referring to aspects not discussed before.

CONCLUSION

This article briefly explained a taxonomy of academic research with specific reference to the research proposal, also known as a “protocol”.

A number of theoretical aspects of research *per se* were described. The emphasis of the article was on the research proposal, an aspect which had for a long time been a problematic area with new and aspirant researchers.

It is trusted that this article will contribute to increased understanding of the research process and, in particular, the research proposal, as a vehicle to obtain access into higher education, with respect to master’s and doctoral studies.

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ANNEXURE A

CAPE PENINSULA UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

**APPLICATION FOR ACCEPTANCE OF PROPOSAL FOR DISSERTATION/THESIS
FOR A POST-GRADUATE DEGREE**

Student number
Surname and initials
Degree (for example: Magister Technologiae (discipline), Doctor Technologiae discipline))
Discipline
Department
Faculty BUSINESS

FOR OFFICE USE
Project number
Ethical clearance number

SECTION 1: PERSONAL DETAILS

1.1 Surname of applicant:

1.2 First name/s of applicant:

1.3 Title (Mr/Mrs/Ms/Miss/Dr/Prof/Rev etc):

1.4 Study field:

1.5 Department:

1.6 Faculty: BUSINESS

1.7 Postal address:
Postal code:

1.8 Telephone number:

1.9 E.mail address:

1.10 Fax no:

1.11 Highest qualifications	Major subject field	Year obtained	Higher Educational Institution
			Cape Peninsula University of Technology

Type of degree registered for:

1. Coursework degree	
2. Full Research degree	

SECTION 2: PROJECT DETAILS

2.1 Title of dissertation/thesis:

SECTION 3: PROBLEM STATEMENT

SECTION 4: OBJECTIVES OF AND NEED FOR THE STUDY
Briefly describe the major objectives and the theoretical approach of the research, which indicates why you believe the study is needed.

SECTION 5: KEY QUESTIONS PERTAINING TO THE RESEARCH
Outline the key (critical) questions which you intend to answer, by undertaking the intended research

SECTION 6: HYPOTHESIS(ES) (OPTIONAL)
This section should briefly discuss possible answers to the key questions posed in section 5

SECTION 7: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
This section describes the steps that you envisage to undertake in terms of the literature search and the empirical survey.
7.1 Literature search — data stream 1 (type and extent of literature to be consulted with a preliminary bibliographical list attached; extraction of normative criteria from existing literature)
See HDC 1.2
7.2 Empirical survey — data stream 2 (description of research, target and response population; quantitative and/or qualitative approach, data collecting, for example with questionnaires, statistical analysis and interpretation of findings)
See HDC 1.2

SECTION 8: PROPOSED OUTLINE OF CHAPTER TITLES	
CHAPTER 1	
CHAPTER 2	
CHAPTER 3	
CHAPTER 4	
CHAPTER 5	
CHAPTER 6	

SECTION 9: SPECIFIC WORK PLAN	
Outline your intended plan of work for the research, which indicates target dates to meet your proposed deadlines.	
ACTIVITY	DATES

SECTION 7: FORMALISATION OF THE APPLICATION	
I hereby declare that the information provided in this application is accurate.	
_____ Signature of applicant	
_____ Date	

RECOMMENDATION OF HEAD OF DEPARTMENT	
_____ Signature	
_____ Full name	
_____ Department	
_____ Date	

RECOMMENDATION OF FACULTY RESEARCH COMMITTEE (FRC)	
Accepted	
Not accepted	Date
_____ Signature of Chairperson of FRC	

FINAL APPROVAL/REJECTION BY DEAN OF THE FACULTY	
APPROVAL/REJECTION	
_____ Date	
DEAN'S SIGNATURE	
