



DEPARTMENT OF POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

MPHIL/PHD RESEARCH HANDBOOK

2023-24

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I. INTRODUCTION TO THE PhD PROGRAMME

The primary aim of the PhD programme in the Department of Politics and International Studies at SOAS is to train Doctoral Researchers to design, research and write a successful doctoral thesis. Those who have completed the doctorate should be qualified as experts in their subfield. They should also be familiar with the conceptual and methodological aspects of the broad range of research in politics and international studies. As a result, they should be equipped to enter academic or other fields of advanced research if they so choose.

Entry Requirements

Doctoral Researchers are considered for entry into the programme if they possess a good advanced degree in Politics equivalent in level and content to the Department's MSc, although applications from individuals with related degrees in cognate disciplines will also be considered. Applicants should include a synopsis (approximately five pages) outlining their proposed research topic. This synopsis should begin with a concise (75 word) summary of the central intellectual problem to be addressed by the proposed research; it should (i) explain the relevance of the proposed research to the advancement of current debates in the academic field of politics; (ii) defend the focus of the study in light of the existing theoretical and empirical knowledge in the subfield of interest, and (iii) specify the methodological approach (i.e. research design and technique) of the project and justify why such an approach is chosen over alternative approaches extant in the subfield. A bibliography of relevant theoretical, comparative and case literature also should be provided. Guidelines for the preparation of proposals can be found below.

In keeping with School regulations, and regardless of any prior supervisory arrangement, no Doctoral Researcher admitted to a PhD programme in another department or centre will be allowed to transfer into the Politics Department without a separate MPhil/PhD application approved by (a) a departmental supervisor and (b) the Politics Research Tutor.

General Programme Structure

The MPhil/PhD programme at SOAS follows a three-year model, with the possibility to extend into a fourth year. The programme consists of research training and coursework in the first year, after which Doctoral Researchers must pass an upgrade from MPhil to PhD status through submission of an 'Upgrade Paper', examined by a viva. This is followed by primary research/fieldwork undertaken in the second year, and the writing up of their thesis in the subsequent year. Doctoral Researchers should aim to be ready for submission by the end of the third year and must submit by the end of the fourth year at the latest.

II. SUPERVISORY STRUCTURE

The Supervisor - Doctoral Researchers are admitted on the basis of the expressed willingness of at least one member of staff to serve as the main supervisor for their PhD thesis. From the Doctoral Researcher's entry in the first year of the MPhil/PhD programme, the supervisor assumes primary responsibility for monitoring the Doctoral Researcher's progress towards the completion of the degree. While the responsibility for developing ideas, gathering and assessing evidence, and preparing the argument is exclusively with the Doctoral Researcher, supervisors are an important source of advice on reading, sources of documentation, and on the development of research design and methodology. Supervisors will also read and comment upon draft chapters, and make recommendations for additional training. To ensure a productive working relationship, it is important for Doctoral Researchers and supervisors to be clear about and agree on their respective expectations (including timelines for the completion of work).

Doctoral Researchers should arrange to meet their supervisors in registration week and at regular intervals thereafter. Members of staff have academic advice hours, which are posted on their office doors and their departmental websites. Supervision meetings at SOAS normally take place every fortnight (for full-time students) during their first year. At some stages more or less frequent meetings may be appropriate. Please ensure that you are receiving adequate supervision by remaining in touch with your supervisor, providing timely and complete pieces of writing in ways that leave sufficient time for reading and evaluation, and by managing your mutual relationship via cordial contact and collegial relations. You should, throughout the degree, keep an up-to-date record of supervisions, and future commitments on the PhD Manager software (described below).

The Associate Supervisor serves on the Doctoral Researcher's research committee. They are also available as a source of academic advice and may sometimes assume primary responsibility for supervision (for instance when the main supervisor is on leave). The Associate Supervisor assists in the assessment of the upgrade paper at the end of the first year, and can offer advice on PhD seminar presentations. When agreed with the main supervisor, the Associate Supervisor can also be the penultimate reader of a PhD thesis draft. In consultation with the lead supervisor, the Doctoral Researcher should identify and approach a potential Associate Supervisor within six weeks of arriving at SOAS. The Associate Supervisor must be in place by the end of the first term. At the end of the first year, the Upgrade paper is examined by a three-person committee consisting of the Supervisor, Associate Supervisor, and another academic identified by the Doctoral Researcher and approved by the lead supervisor and the Doctoral Research Director. The Upgrade examination is a pivotal moment in the development of any research project and so the choice of supervisors and examiners presents an opportunity to receive the highest quality of feedback on the project before the active research phase. If it is not possible to identify anyone who contributes a particular

perspective to the Upgrade Committee, the third member is typically the Director of Doctoral Research. Committee members need not be in the Politics Department or, in unusual circumstances, even at SOAS if the individual possesses a valuable form of specialist knowledge from which the student could benefit. This is most commonly the case if the supervisors have been chosen for their specialism in a methodological approach or theoretic field but are not specialists on the particular location in which fieldwork will occur. The committee evaluates the upgrade paper and determines the suitability of the student for upgrading to full PhD status. The committee also has a particular responsibility in relation to requests of transfer to Continuation status after the third year.

The Director of Doctoral Research is the key liaison between Doctoral Researchers and the Department for issues that cannot be solved directly with the supervisors or with the Faculty Office. If a Doctoral Researcher is experiencing problems with a supervisor or wishes to switch to a new supervisor, the Director of Doctoral Research and the Head of Department will make the necessary arrangements as they see fit. If a supervisor is on study leave or for other reasons becomes unavailable, the Director of Doctoral Research, in co-ordination with the Head of Department, will likewise work to find temporary or long-term alternative supervision as deemed appropriate.

Director of Doctoral Research 2023-24

Professor Salwa Ismail

Email: si1@soas.ac.uk

Room: MB204

Advice and Feedback Hours: Thursdays 1-3pm.

III. ACTIVITIES UPON ARRIVAL (TERM 1)

Within three weeks of your arrival at SOAS, you should aim to check off the following milestones to ensure that your year gets off to a strong start.

Begin to become familiar with the Bloomsbury Learning Environment (BLE) (ble.soas.ac.uk), the main online platform for SOAS teaching. Sign up for the 'POMPHIL' class on BLE (https://ble.soas.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=33738)	
Begin to become familiar with the HAPLO PhD Manager software. (https://doctoralschool.soas.ac.uk/do/soas-auth/login)	
Attend the SOAS Doctoral School Welcome Information and Reception on 29 September at 16:30 (London time) in the Lady David Gallery at 53 Gordon Square.	
Attend the weekly 'Common Core' training for new SOAS PhD students (SOAS-wide). Once you have been enrolled at SOAS, you should be able to gain access to the BLE module page. (Further information provided at the SOAS Doctoral School Welcome Information session above).	
From Week commencing October 2nd, attend the weekly workshop. 'Politics MPhil Methods' (more information on the 'POMPHIL' site above). Thursdays 15.00-17.00, Room: S208. First session: October 5th. It is vital to attend this opening session.	
Work out a schedule of meetings with your supervisor and discuss options for Associate Supervisors (you should seek to meet a range of possible second supervisors, and have decided by the end of Reading Week in Term 1).	
Complete and submit a 'Training Needs Analysis' (Via PhD Manager). Discuss language-training requirements with your supervisor and prepare an application to fund relevant training if required. Discuss supplementary training options with your supervisor (e.g., auditing MSc courses in Politics, or other Departments at SOAS, language courses, etc.)	
Register to receive notices from relevant SOAS Research Centres (see below).	
Get to know SOAS Library resources.	

Further Coursework

Doctoral Researchers may need to attend appropriate MSc level and language courses as advised by the Supervisory Committee to build up their overall grasp of a certain subject or language. This will entail weekly attendance of, and positive contribution to (including presentations), the module as required. (Registration in MSc-level modules is subject to approval by the respective module convener.) Language training requirements should be decided in consultation with the Supervisor

early in Term 1 to increase the likelihood of securing funding within the School (decisions are made on a first-come-first-served basis). When the relevant language course is not offered in the School of Languages, Cultures and

Linguistics Doctoral Researchers can apply (with a supporting statement from their supervisor) for funding to support their training. Doctoral Researchers should look out for relevant announcements.

IV. MONITORING OF PROGRESS

A necessary foundation for research is a **manageable research plan**, which should develop from the research proposal which formed an application. This plan should be worked out in draft form and agreed jointly by both Doctoral Researcher and supervisor in the first term. It can then be expanded and updated throughout the PhD to ensure that all parties understand progress with the project. It should include initially: a statement of the main research question; a provisional title for the thesis; a brief bibliography of the relevant literature; a rough division of the intended thesis by chapters and/or topic; a brief account of the proposed methodology; a time schedule for the different stages of research all the way to submission. Clearly, the research plan is only a plan and, in many cases, will need to be extensively revised as the research and writing progresses. But it is an essential tool in enabling Doctoral Researcher and supervisor alike to plan ahead, to identify difficulties before they arise, and to have an agreed basis for the future progress of the research work.

At the start of the PhD programme, Doctoral Researchers will sign up to the PhD Manager software. This provides a way of recording contacts between supervisors and students, a record of the evolution of the student's plans, achievements and writing and a way of monitoring the skills that students have acquired and any future training they will do. It is advisable to write summary entries of each supervision meeting and all agreed aims and deadlines for the records of the Doctoral Researcher and the supervisor. The system can accept document attachments and so this is also a sensible place to record versions of the research plan as it evolves.

The supervisor and the Doctoral Researcher should meet regularly. Most Doctoral Researchers go through phases of embarrassment that their work is not progressing well enough or quickly enough and may seek to avoid meeting their supervisors. This is a counter-productive, if understandable, habit. It is vital that contact is maintained throughout the first year of a degree, during fieldwork (remotely, if not directly in person), and during the potentially lonely and challenging writing up period and that all difficulties are talked through openly so that the agreed schedule of work is not allowed to slip too far.

Doctoral Researcher progress is monitored both through the PhD Manager software and through

Annual Progression Reports (APRs). APRs evaluate the quality of the work submitted and the pace of progress. They are filled in by supervisors in coordination with the Doctoral Researcher. They are used by the Registry and the Pro-Director for Research and Enterprise as an overall guide to Doctoral Researcher's progress and should be used for signalling any difficulties either student or supervisor may be experiencing.

V. DEPARTMENTAL AND ACADEMIC LIFE

Although the supervisory structure is designed to ensure researchers are being supported and monitored, are receiving feedback and being inspired, undertaking a research degree involves becoming an independent scholar and a vital skill for such scholars is the ability to take ownership and responsibility for their project. This means seeking out support, feedback and inspiration not just from their supervisors but from their cohort, from training programmes and from the wider academic world – at SOAS and well beyond. Balancing time spent reading, writing and researching your project with contributing to and benefitting from relationships with other scholars and engagement with scholarly networks is a vital skill.

Departmental Seminar

The Politics Department Research Seminar takes place on select Wednesdays 15:00-17:00 (London time) and is a crucial element of the shared intellectual life of staff and postgraduate students. It is a forum where invited speakers will present and discuss work in progress. A seminar schedule will be circulated at the beginning of the year, followed by regular announcements. There is often an opportunity following the seminar to meet and socialise with the visiting speaker (occasionally over drinks and dinner). *Research students are strongly encouraged to attend this seminar on a regular basis and may be invited to act as discussants.* The seminar series and contacts for those organising the events are advertised at: <https://www.soas.ac.uk/politics/events/departmental-seminars/>

Centres, Associations, and Networks.

Doctoral Researchers are encouraged to take advantage of the various resources available at SOAS and become actively involved with the many regional centres, and research networks and to attend speaker series organized throughout the School (see the SOAS website <https://www.soas.ac.uk/centres/> for more information). Members within the Politics Department are associated with the following centres and associations:

Thematic Centres

Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy (CISD)

Centre for the International Politics of Conflict, Rights, and Justice (CCRJ)

Centre for Comparative Political Thought (CCPT)
Asia-Pacific Centre for Social Science
Centre for the Politics of Energy Security
Centre for Gender Studies
Centre for Migration and Diaspora Studies Centre for Media and Film Studies

Area Studies Centres

SOAS Middle East Institute
Centre for Palestine Studies
Centre for South Asian Studies
Centre for African Studies
Centre for Southeast Asian Studies
Centre for Contemporary Central Asia and the Caucasuses Centre for Iranian Studies
Centre for Contemporary Pakistan Studies Centre for Korean Studies
SOAS China Institute
Centre for Taiwan Studies Japan Research Centre

Professional Associations beyond SOAS

Political Studies Association (PSA) - www.psa.ac.uk/ International Studies Association (ISA) - www.isanet.org/
British International Studies Association (BISA) - www.bisa.ac.uk/
European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) - <http://www.essex.ac.uk/ecpr/> European
International Studies Association (EISA) - <http://www.eisa-net.org/> American Political Science
Association (APSA) - www.apsanet.org/

Associations dedicated to the study of particular themes:

Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism (ASEN) - <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/ASEN/>
The Association for the Study of the Worldwide African Diaspora (ASWAD) - <http://www.aswadiaspora.org/>
Development Studies Association - <http://www.devstud.org.uk/>
The British Society for Middle East Studies – <http://www.brismes.ac.uk> African Studies Association - www.africanstudies.org/
The African Studies Association of the UK - www.asauk.net/
The Association for Asian Studies - www.aasianst.org/

British Association of South Asian Studies – <http://www.basas.ac.uk> Middle East Studies Association (MESA) - www.mesa.arizona.edu/

The British Academy website lists resources available to researchers in a number of disciplinary and geographic areas.

VI. DOCTORAL RESEARCH REPRESENTATION

Doctoral Researchers elect three individuals to form a committee for each academic year. The committee is encouraged to organise social and intellectual events to facilitate the integration of a cohort of researchers, and is intended to serve as a forum for Research Students in the Department to discuss issues raised by fellow students concerning the programme, and to channel concerns to the Director of Doctoral Research, the Doctoral School and the Department as a whole where appropriate.

Two members of the committee should be Doctoral Researchers in their first or second year, one should be an advanced Doctoral Researcher (that is, in their third or possibly fourth year). Elections should be organised by Doctoral Researchers themselves (a reminder will be sent out by the Director of Doctoral Research in Term 1), and held by the end of October (first year elections usually take place in the context of the MPhil Methods module). Elected students should ensure that the Departmental Manager in the Politics Office is aware of their position as representatives. They can then be included in all relevant announcements of staff meetings etc.

Doctoral Research representatives are invited to attend Departmental meetings. In addition, representatives participate in consultation meetings with members of staff to discuss all aspects of the Department's work of concern to Doctoral Researchers. These meetings take place in the last week of each term and may also include additional interested students from the MPhil and PhD cohorts at the invitation of the elected representatives. Elected Research Student Representatives should initiate consultation with their peers to bring forward relevant issues. This has in the past been done using SurveyMonkey or social media platforms.

The Research Students' Association (RSA) represents all Doctoral Researchers at SOAS. The RSA has a number of ordinary members as well as a president and vice-president. The RSA has two members on the Doctoral School Management Group who make sure that students' voices are heard on the issues that concern them, and that students are aware of all the initiatives taken in relation to the doctoral experience. The elections for the RSA president and vice-president are held in the spring, and the elections for the ordinary members are conducted in the autumn. The RSA also represents Doctoral Researchers to the SOAS Student Union and a number of student committees. Further information on the RSA can be found at this link: <https://www.soas.ac.uk/doctoral-school/phd->

[community/research-students-association](https://www.soas.ac.uk/research/publications/soas-journals-and-books/soas-journal-postgraduate-research). In addition to the RSA there is a student journal of postgraduate research: <https://www.soas.ac.uk/research/publications/soas-journals-and-books/soas-journal-postgraduate-research>

VII. RESEARCH TRAINING YEAR 1

Doctoral Researchers are expected to upgrade from MPhil to PhD student status within twelve months of their registration. This transfer is NOT automatic. Successful completion of the WHOLE training programme is a requirement for progression from MPhil to PhD. This means Doctoral Researchers MUST attend all courses and complete ALL written assignments. Those failing to do this will be deemed to have failed to satisfy the requirements for upgrading.

<i>COURSES</i>	<i>ASSIGNMENTS</i>
	<i>Agreed work plan</i> Discussed in first few supervision meetings and agreed by Reading Week, Term 1.
Politics MPhil Methods (Terms 1 and 2) *compulsory*	<i>Literature Review</i> Due start of second term . Submitted to supervisors.
Upgrade Paper Workshop (Term 2) *compulsory*	<i>Preliminary Upgrade Paper</i> Due end of second term . Submitted to supervisors for discussion.
Common Core (SOAS-wide): Common Core I: Research Project Management (Term 1); Common Core II: Technology-Enhanced Research (Term 2)	Common Core I: Participation in all interactive exercises on the Bloomsbury Learning Environment (20%); 5,000-word Research Project Canvas (80%). Common Core II: Participation in all interactive exercises on the Bloomsbury Learning Environment (20%); Two written assignments on methodology (1,500 and 3,000 words weighed at 30% and 50% respectively)
Epigeum Research Integrity Course	<i>Online Assessment</i> Requires successful completion any time prior to submission of Upgrade Paper: prior to 1 May .

<p>Possible other options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MSc module or language module as specified/approved by supervisor (NB: Language training requirements should be decided early on to enhance the possibility of securing appropriate funding within SOAS). 	<p><i>Final Upgrade Paper</i></p> <p>Department deadline for submitting upgrade paper: 1 May</p> <p><i>Upgrade Viva</i></p> <p>Supervisors should arrange date with Doctoral Researcher and committee members between 6 and 15 May.</p> <p>Deadline for supervisor to advise Doctoral Researcher and Doctoral School of upgrade viva outcome. 23 May.</p>
	<p>If applicable: <i>Revised Upgrade Paper</i> due 15 July.</p> <p>Supervisor to advise Doctoral Researcher and Doctoral School of Revised Upgrade Paper outcome: 1 August.</p>
	<p><i>Fieldwork Form</i></p> <p>Should be submitted for approval at least six weeks before fieldwork begins. Fieldwork cannot begin before Upgrade has been passed.</p>

Politics MPhil Methods (Terms 1 and 2)

This module provides Doctoral Researchers with the basic ‘tools’ needed to successfully design and conduct a research project. It consists of weekly seminars (Thursdays, 15.00- 17.00 London time) lead by members of staff from the Politics Department based on core readings, student presentations and group discussions. The first part of the module addresses debates in the philosophy of social science research, aspects of research design and how to construct a literature review. The sessions in the second part introduce a variety of qualitative methodological approaches, including comparison, ethnography, interviews and discourse analyses. The course features sessions introducing quantitative methods. The Module Convener for 2023-24 is: Professor Salwa Ismail. This course is **COMPULSORY**.

Within Politics, there is an additional module called ‘Introduction to Quantitative Methods in Social Research’ (15PPOH035). Please contact Dr Tolga Sinmazdemir if you wish to take this module.

Upgrade Paper Workshop (Term 2)

This one-term seminar is designed to complement the above module(s) and gives Doctoral Researchers the opportunity to present their doctoral research projects (drafts of their preliminary upgrade paper, essentially) in an informal setting. This will allow Doctoral Researchers to discuss challenges they face in devising their own research design and choosing a methodological approach

and to discuss issues of fieldwork and project management with peers and members of staff. The module convener for 2023-24 is Professor Salwa Ismail. This module is **COMPULSORY**.

Common Core (SOAS-wide) (Term 1 and 2)

You receive Politics discipline-specific guidance and training from your supervisors and Directors of Doctoral Research. In addition, there is interdisciplinary training, which is centrally organised and open to all Doctoral Researchers across the institution, including the two Common Core modules. These modules, as the title indicates, aim to provide a strong foundation for every SOAS PhD student regardless of their subjects. They do not clash with Politics MPhil Methods seminars and other training activities organised within the department, so please make sure that you attend them too according to your Director of Doctoral Researchers' instructions. The Common Core modules offer 60 credits in total. Hence anyone who have completed both modules successfully but has to withdraw from the PhD programme will be eligible for a Postgraduate Certificate as an exit award. Attendance at the weekly seminars for both these courses is **OPTIONAL**, but you are strongly encouraged to join the initial sessions to understand the potential benefits of this School-wide programme.

You can find the full details of both modules at the following links:

Common Core I: Research Project Management (Term 1)

<https://www.soas.ac.uk/courseunits/15DOCC001.html>

Common Core II: Technology-Enhanced Research (Term 2)

<https://www.soas.ac.uk/courseunits/15DOCC002.html>

Common Core I and II are convened by Dr Yenn Lee, with help of two Associate Tutors.

VIII. FIRST YEAR ASSIGNMENTS AND THE UPGRADE PROCESS

Doctoral Researchers are expected to submit a copy of their *Literature Review* to their supervisor (and, usually, to the second member of the supervisory committee) at the *beginning* of Term 2. Doctoral Researchers then present drafts of their Upgrade Paper to the *Upgrade Paper Writing Workshop* throughout Term 2. Doctoral Researchers are then expected to submit a completed draft of their Upgrade Paper to their supervisors by the *end* of Term 2. Students are strongly encouraged to establish clear and sensible deadlines for handing in these drafts. This is vital for ensuring that supervisors will know when to expect drafts and for Doctoral Researchers to receive timely (and, ideally, written) feedback.

Doctoral Researchers must submit their final upgrade paper via PhD Manager by 1 May. This should be accompanied by a completed Upgrade Form (available via PhD Manager) including a research ethics review. These should be completed in consultation with supervisors. The final upgrade

paper will be assessed by the Supervisory Committee and a viva will be held. During the viva Doctoral Researchers will be asked to present their paper and to respond to comments and critique from the committee. Doctoral Researchers should liaise with their supervisor(s) and the committee to identify a suitable date. **The Upgrade Viva should take place between 6 and 15 May.** Following the viva, Doctoral Researchers should hear back from their supervisor very quickly and may either have their upgrade approved immediately or be asked to make either minor or major revisions over the summer. If the latter, a new version needs to be submitted by **15 July** and, if necessary, combined with a second viva. The Supervisory Committee will then reach a collective decision and submit a report to the Doctoral School by **1 August**. Any late submission will put the student at risk of being withdrawn from the programme, unless a successful application for mitigating circumstances has been approved. The link to the application for mitigating circumstances is:

<https://www.soas.ac.uk/doctoral-school/mphil/phd-journey/when-things-are-not-going-planned/mitigating-circumstances-pgr>

The Supervisory Committee drafts a report on each submission of the upgrade paper, a copy of which should be kept on file by the lead supervisor and submitted to the Director of Doctoral Research, and the Doctoral School. All parts of all reports will be made available to the Doctoral Researcher. Reports will include (i) a brief summary of the submission; (ii) strengths and weaknesses of the submission; (iii) suggestions for improvement; (iv) a recommendation (with rationale). At the end of the process, the committee must recommend one of the following outcomes:

- Upgrading to PhD status,
- Not proceeding beyond the MPhil degree,
- Termination of the research project.

No Doctoral Researcher is given permission to leave for fieldwork until a decision has been made about upgrading. No Doctoral Researcher will be permitted to enrol for a second full-time year, or part-time equivalent, unless the upgrade has taken place and the outcome recorded, or a suspension of regulations is in place.

IX. ONE APPROACH TO PREPARING AN UPGRADE PAPER

A research plan is a living document that evolves with your doctoral project, typically beginning from the original research proposal presented in an application for admission. Elements of this plan can be developed – as the literature review becomes more sophisticated and appropriate research methods are specified – into an Upgrade Paper. An Upgrade Paper then typically serves as an early version of the Introduction to a completed doctoral thesis. An Upgrade paper is a justification for and a guide to work that the researcher proposes to do in the future in order to answer a research question (to which logically, they are assumed not to already know the answer – otherwise the research would not be

needed). An Introduction to a completed thesis on the other hand is a description of work already done and a summary of the argument that the evidence gathered and analysed during the research claims to justify.

The upgrade exam enables an assessment, by scholars other than just the candidate's own supervisor, of progress made by the end of one year, assessing whether the candidate has been able to specify a valuable, manageable, sensible and ethical project that will make an original contribution to knowledge in their chosen field.

The upgrade paper thus typically includes the following:

1. An elaboration of the principal question and sub-questions to be addressed;
2. A literature review;
3. A discussion of methodological frameworks;
4. An outline of a fieldwork plan;
5. A timetable for completion within three (maximum four) years.

This is a long way of saying that, at the point of writing an Upgrade Paper it would be odd for a researcher to know what it is that they want to argue. This makes the task of writing it noticeably different from writing an essay or dissertation.

1. Framing your topic in the form of a question.

In the first section of a plan, readers will want to know not what your argument is, but what your question is, and understand why you have chosen it. The question often takes the form of a single sentence and aims to specify itself (in terms of naming events, dates and locations) as closely as possible. It could emerge from a real-world problem or event that practitioners, commentators and/or academic analysts have struggled to understand or characterise, or from a more abstract academic debate - ideally, both. But it needs to be an interesting question, and a *puzzle*. In other words, it won't do for the answer to be obvious (to you or to everyone else) or trite, or for there to be a well-established consensus on the answer (unless you also have grounds for suggesting that this consensus is false). You need to be able to explain to an informed audience of people trained in your broad discipline but not as preoccupied with the same issue as you why finding an answer might matter to them, and show them that there is an understandable difference of opinion over what kinds of answers might be sensible. This might involve referencing the terms of an extant debate in the literature that you go into in much greater detail in the literature review. A considerable amount of work at the start of a doctoral research project typically involves the framing of questions.

2. The literature review

Most academic questions have been approached in some form already by 'the literature'. Often the best way to start answering a question is to consider what others have said. There is usually a range

of influential answers offered to questions somewhat similar to yours. In some cases, the way that people frame their questions specifically reference the phrases and concepts introduced by particular thinkers. These phrases and concepts are almost always subject to debate and critical appraisal by other authors.

You should not think that if some article or author has already answered your question, even with reference to your case, that's a reason to avoid the question: quite the opposite. An original contribution to knowledge does not imply an original question, only an original approach to answering it. Others' work can be a kick-off point for a critical engagement with their claims and methods. However, it might well be that nobody has tried to answer 'the question' through your case, in your time period, or in some more narrow but strategic way that you identify and specify in your question. Readers still need to know whether other people have relied on an implied answer to your question as an aspect of some broader theory, or have answered a similar question in relation to other cases. The claim to be filling 'a gap in the literature' or answering a question that nobody else has ever considered might be a convenient way to avoid thinking through concepts that you might wish to use as if they are uncontroversial. It's rarely true that such gaps are absolute.

Ideally before beginning the PhD, or at least as part of your research plan, you will have developed a bibliography. You should have used Google Scholar, jstor, ebscohost, the library catalogue and other bibliographic databases, and the citations from relevant texts, to identify whether there is sufficient academic literature and / or primary data / policy-oriented literature out there for you to be able to engage the question in the way that you have framed it. This bibliography will obviously grow as you work and particularly in relation to advice from your supervisor and reactions to your work from other scholars.

Once you have established a sensible list of texts to discuss, readers then need to understand your assessment of how justifiable the answers extant research provides are. This helps the reader to understand why you might then choose the method and case that you do. A literature review thus introduces the reader to the main issues raised by this literature. It should demonstrate that you have read and understood the core arguments made by other authors, and can re-present them fairly and elegantly, in summary. This means giving the key theories room to breathe, to make their case. In other words, you don't need, initially, to respond to everything that others say – just explain what they say and why. At the same time, when finished, a literature review should not just read; 'x says this, y says this, z says this' using the terminology or concepts or findings provided by these texts as if they are obviously acceptable. You need to provide a critical commentary on the ideas, showing what methods other researchers have adopted and considering the costs and benefits of the strategies they have adopted, drawing out similarities and contrasts between them, putting the authors and arguments 'in contact' with each other, even if they don't write directly about each other.

In reading each of the authors you are seeking then to establish both what their argument is on the surface, but also to draw out in a commentary in your own 'voice' what ideas and assumptions underpin it, and how adequate the evidence deployed to support the claims is. As you read more authors, you can compare whether these assumptions, or approaches to evidence are shared. If so, why do authors reach different conclusions? If not, why not?

The questions then arise; what are you going to say about their similarities and differences? Are you starting to identify common 'schools of thought'? How might we be able to judge between different, and at times opposing, accounts? Sometimes you can resolve any debates purely logically. But if one can 'resolve' a debate thus, it is unclear why further work or a case study that you plan to develop might deepen our understanding. So, if you aim to develop your argument through close study of particular cases, or by sourcing primary evidence rather than simply considering the extant literature, you need a justification. What dilemmas are left behind once we've considered the extant literature? What are the *unresolved* questions that emerge from the literature? How might cases contribute to our understanding/help to resolve them? By the end of a literature review, we're looking to have identified a tension or confusion that *you* genuinely feel confused or undecided about. That is the most reliable basis for convincing others that the issue is worthy of further study and motivating interesting research. You may well have a sense of what you think the best answer to the question is likely to be, but if you don't have on the table any other plausible explanations or interpretations that you feel need investigation or testing, even disproving, it's more likely you will set out to confirm your biases, or are essentially hoping to make a 'defense' of an author or position that you can already sketch out. This way lies uninteresting work for the researcher and the reader!

3. A Method

As part of the literature review it is likely that you will have explained to the reader how other researchers came to the conclusions they did. We should have a sense of what kinds of methods have resulted in their findings, and how your assessment of them helps us understand your approach. Were others' methods adequate? If so, are you trying to replicate a particularly brilliant study but test its limits by using it to look at a different case? Is this a way of testing or expanding the evidence base? Is there some weakness in their methods? How will you remedy this?

You need to establish that you are able to take our knowledge forward and have a systematic approach to gathering evidence. This is likely to include a discussion of other methods that you could have chosen to adopt, or that you can see others would adopt in trying to answer similar questions, and an explanation of the choices you have made to include or exclude the range of methods that could be used. We also need here an explanation of case selection. Be aware that that case-study(s) might not necessarily be in the unit of a country; it could be cities, particular policy

processes, institutions, media products or even individuals. You will also need an awareness of how grand/generalisable a claim it is possible to stand up on the kinds of cases/evidence you plan to deploy as a test. You should discuss the acknowledged weaknesses of the method you choose and what you might be able to do to mitigate predictable problems. Here the Methods training course and its extended reading lists should be a great help. The course provides a taster of a range of methods and approaches. Some (many?) of them will not appeal to you at first approach, but it is a very valuable exercise to recognise that others have thought that these methods and techniques are useful, and to think through what people with these preferences might do if they were to consider your question, and to think about why you accept or reject the idea that this should make up part of your doctoral research.

4. The fieldwork plan

The most fundamental questions are: (1) are there enough sources available to you to answer this question with a reasonable volume of fieldwork? (2) Does your chosen method suggest a way of gathering and analysing it? Whatever the technique/method you adopt, you need to find a way to explain what it is you will do to test plausible answers and interpretations, and how you will gather and analyse evidence. This might involve statistical analysis. In which case you need to tell us about the datasets you will consider. It might involve archives. In which case, we need to know where they are, what it is possible to know about them without visiting, and whether others have already looked at them. It might involve interviews or questionnaires. In which case we need to know how you will approach your subjects, if and how you will sample and select them. The fieldwork plan should include a discussion of visa and access issues; funding applications needed and timelines for them; whether you will be hosted for the research by an institution; ethical issues and any in-country processes of approval that you will need to go through. If you can develop and share interview frameworks or questionnaire/s developed ahead of time, do so. Many of the most helpful conversations with examiners at the Upgrade stage come from sharing with them the nitty-gritty of your project.

5. Research Ethics and Safety

All upgrade papers, and particularly those whose field research includes work with live subjects, require a reflection on the ethical implications and complications of the research. Doctoral Researchers are required to take a SOAS-wide ethics and risk assessment workshop that is part of the 'Common Core' modules taken by all SOAS PhD students. The Doctoral Researcher's supervisory committee will assess questions of ethics and safety during the upgrade process and the student, together with the lead supervisor, need to fill out a corresponding form that has to be submitted to the School following the viva. Should the subject of one's research be ethically complex (for example dealing with questions of sexual violence, interviews with perpetrators of violence, or work with populations especially vulnerable to violence or repression), the Doctoral Researcher will need to specify in writing how these issues are addressed and further approval from the Associate Dean for

Research (ADR) may be sought as well.

6. *A timetable for completion*

This usually takes the form of a table that lays out what each chapter of your thesis involves. It might have columns that list the sources that will be considered in each section, the types of primary research involved, and the ways in which the argument in such sections might be presented and tested. Many these will consist of around 8 chapters. These are going to be written in about 9 terms. It is thus sometimes smart to think about completing a second chapter before going on fieldwork. This might well be a chapter chosen strategically because it is, for example, a historical background chapter, largely researchable on the basis of secondary sources available in the UK, or chosen because it will give the researcher valuable background knowledge that will make it easier to settle into empirical work. It is also smart to consider how much data processing (transcription, coding etc.) and writing can occur during fieldwork, rather than assuming that all of the processing and writing will be done in the third year of a thesis. Processing and writing as you go can be a helpful way to check that you're collecting the right amount (not too little, not too much) data.

X. AFTER UPGRADE

Fieldwork Procedures

Doctoral Researchers undertaking fieldwork will generally do so in their second year. A maximum of three terms' fieldwork is usually permitted in a full-time PhD programme. Fieldwork of longer than 12 months has to be approved by the relevant Director of Doctoral Studies who will approve cases only where clear academic grounds have been presented by (or through) the supervisor, and where it has been demonstrated that extended or late fieldwork will not affect completion of research within the deadlines for the degree. During their first year, Doctoral Researchers are expected to locate and apply to any relevant sources of funding for fieldwork. Discussion of how to locate funding sources occurs within the Research Training Seminar and the generic Research Training Day run by the School. The Careers Office can also help locate sources of funding to support fieldwork.

Training Beyond Year 1

The Doctoral Researcher and supervisor must fill in an **Application for Approval to Undertake Overseas Fieldwork Research** via PhD Manager. Research plans, including overseas University contacts and a description of arrangements for supervision while in the field need to be outlined. During fieldwork, at least monthly contact is expected. It is the Doctoral Researcher's responsibility to assess the risk and discuss it as necessary with their Supervisors and others. **Doctoral Researchers should submit the fieldwork application at least two months before their departure.** Similarly, on returning from fieldwork Doctoral Researchers should contact Registry as well as their supervisory committee. Doctoral Researchers can use the library and other School facilities as usual during their

fieldwork year.

Throughout the process of research design, fieldwork, and writing, Doctoral Researchers are expected to maintain regular contact with their supervisors. The work of writing the PhD dissertation is the Doctoral Researcher's alone, supported, of course, by regular meetings with the supervisor. Doctoral Researchers are expected to present one or two draft chapters of their dissertation at **seminars or conferences during their third and/or final year**. This is an excellent opportunity to receive feedback on core aspects of their unfolding thesis in the write-up phase from members of staff and fellow Doctoral Researchers. Many seminars are coordinated by academic members of staff. In some years 'writing seminars' are organised together with participating Doctoral Researchers (ideally the PhD Doctoral Researcher Representative).

Advanced PhD Doctoral Researchers are strongly encouraged to participate in **research workshops** offered inside and outside SOAS and to attend and present at **conferences** organised by the major research associations in the field, as well as various thematic and area-studies conferences (for a selection see list below). These are excellent opportunities for networking, receiving constructive feedback, and for making a start in publishing. Especially for Doctoral Researchers wishing to pursue an academic career **the importance of participating in conferences and workshops cannot be emphasized enough**. Doctoral Researchers accepted to present at these or similar conferences may apply to the Doctoral School for funding (see below). Some Associations also offer travel stipends, as do institutions like the British Academy.

Doctoral Researchers should bear in mind that fieldwork in the second year can take up to nine months whilst final redrafting of the dissertation usually takes at least three to four months. This leaves approximately two years for the substantive chapters to be written in the intervening period. The 100,000-word limit should be treated as a maximum, a more realistic total is around 80-90,000 words. Although the writing up is usually weighted towards the end of the process, it is important to start writing as soon as possible, and not to think that 'preparing', 'researching' and 'writing' are three separate processes that will not overlap. In nine terms, this suggests around 10,000 words per term, with each chapter going through several drafts and revisions following feedback. The schedule is tight, especially as Doctoral Researchers may also be doing some teaching in their third year.

Teaching is an important part of doctoral training for Doctoral Researchers considering an academic career. The Department aims to regularly offer advanced Doctoral Researchers the possibility to work as a Tutor (or Graduate Teaching Assistant, GTA) on one of the modules offered in the Department (for a *maximum* of two years). Tutorial duties involve seminar teaching, holding office hours, and marking. Doctoral Researchers taking on a Tutor post are expected to have completed a GTA training module offered by SOAS. Those doing teaching will be expected to organize their time appropriately.

Teaching must not be used as an excuse for failure to submit chapters or meet the formal requirements. Please consult the **Department's GTA Handbook** for more information.

XI. THESIS SUBMISSION

Doctoral Researchers are generally expected to produce the first draft of their thesis by the end of the third year. Many Doctoral Researchers then seek a fourth year of study, or **Continuation**. Continuation status is only intended for Doctoral Researchers who have completed their research, finished first drafts of all or most chapters, and are in the final stages of revising the thesis for submission. Under Continuation status Doctoral Researchers will continue to have access to School facilities, including use of the SOAS Library, but are entitled to receive only a reduced level of supervision. Move to Continuation status requires the recommendation of the supervisory committee and completion of the appropriate request on PhD Manager.

When the thesis is nearing completion, both Doctoral Researcher and supervisor must begin to plan for the final stages – the submission and examination of the thesis. The Doctoral Researcher will need to submit an 'Entry Form' via PhD Manager **no later than two months before planned submission**, including an abstract. It is the responsibility of the supervisor to recommend examiners (at least one of whom should be familiar with examination requirements at SOAS) and an internal independent Chair to a panel within the Department who vet the appropriateness of nominated examiners. While a Doctoral Researcher may have had contact with their examiners, it is normally expected that the examiners have not read large parts of the dissertation nor had extended discussions of the thesis with the Doctoral Researcher beforehand. Your supervisor will contact your examiners and arrange the day, time and place of the examination. When the thesis is complete, you will need to **submit three copies**. It is your responsibility to see that the thesis is prepared **in the approved format**. It can be initially bound in soft covers, to be replaced by hard cover binding after the successful examination.

The examiners of a PhD thesis have a number of options open to them: they can deem the candidate as having fully met the requirements of a PhD (or ask for only minor amendments to be made); they can require more substantial changes to be made and the revised thesis presented within 12 months (usually this is done without a second viva); they can decide that the candidate has failed to meet the standard required for a PhD but may be offered an MPhil degree instead; or they may fail the candidate entirely. [**NOTE:** This information should be read in conjunction with the SOAS Regulations.]

Statement on Plagiarism

Doctoral Researchers are reminded that all work submitted as part of the requirement for any

examination of the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London) must be expressed in their own words and incorporate their own ideas and judgments. Plagiarism- that is, the presentation of another person's thoughts or words as though they were the Doctoral Researcher's own – is an examination offence and must be avoided. Direct quotations from the published or unpublished work of others must always be clearly identified as such by being placed inside quotation marks, and a full reference to their source must be provided in proper form. A series of short quotations from several different sources, if not clearly identified as such, constitutes plagiarism just as much as does a single unacknowledged long quotation from a single source. Equally, if Doctoral Researchers summarise another persons' ideas and judgments, they must refer to that person in their text as the source of the ideas and judgments, and include the work referred to in their bibliography. Failure to observe these rules may result in an allegation of cheating. Doctoral Researchers should therefore consult their tutor or supervisor if they are in any doubt about what is permissible. Where Doctoral Researchers draw on their own previous written work, whether submitted as coursework for their current degree, or for a previous degree or qualification, this must be clearly stated.

XII. FUNDING AND FURTHER RESEARCH SUPPORT

Living in London is expensive, and it can be difficult for Doctoral Researchers to finance their studies, especially if they do not hold a scholarship. It therefore is important that Doctoral Researchers undertake a realistic assessment of their financial resources for the first year and beyond and discuss potential issues with their supervisor. While SOAS and the Politics Department are continually looking to improve funding opportunities for its Doctoral Researchers, it is important to be pro-active and seek funding opportunities externally.

There are a number of bodies, ranging from the major research foundations in the UK such as the British Academy or the Economic Social and Research Council (ESRC), professional Associations (see list below for a selection) and other national and international institutions where you can apply for travel and conference grants. Registry also compiled a list of scholarships (<http://www.soas.ac.uk/registry/scholarships/research/>) and further funding sources and useful links are provided by the Student Advice and Wellbeing Office <http://www.soas.ac.uk/studentadviceandwellbeing/students/money/pg-funding/>.

Other universities have similar websites and often doing a bit of research pays off. In all cases, it is important to be aware of eligibility criteria and application deadlines.

SOAS Doctoral School Grants

SOAS runs four grants for PGR students to apply for: Fieldwork, Conference, Language Acquisition and Student Led-initiatives. Each grant has its own eligibility criteria and maximum award. Current information can be found here:

<https://www.soas.ac.uk/doctoral-school/phd-training-and-development/doctoral-school-grants#:~:text=The%20Doctoral%20School%20provides%20funding,once%20during%20their%20PhD%20programme>

Department-Funded Scholarships

Additional funding opportunities for Doctoral Researchers may be available from the Department and Doctoral Researchers are asked to look out for relevant announcements in the year. In particular, students should look out for announcements relating to the following scholarship programmes:

Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research (Syracuse University)

Each year the Department provides two to three **scholarships** for members of the Politics Department (Doctoral Researchers and Academic Staff) to cover the cost of attendance at the Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Methods Research (IQMR) at Syracuse University in the U.S. This highly regarded two-week course provides a comprehensive introduction to qualitative and multi-method research with a special emphasis on applications. The scholarships are competitive and the deadline for applications is typically in late January or early February and will be announced in due time. For details regarding the course see: <https://www.maxwell.syr.edu/research/center-for-qualitative-and-multi-method-inquiry/institute-for-qualitative-multi-method->

Lawrence Saez Memorial Scholarship in Mixed and Quantitative Methods

In order to enhance the Department's commitment to the rigorous use of mixed and quantitative methods in political science, we are offering a scholarship to a Politics research student or academic staff member to attend a mixed or quantitative methods course. The selected individual will receive a scholarship up to the value of £1500. The selection panel will demonstrate some flexibility on where mixed or quantitative methods training can be obtained, but strong preference will be given to individuals who attend the following:

- Essex Summer School in Social Science Data Analysis: <https://essexsummerschool.com/>
- The ECPR Summer School in Methods and Techniques: <https://ecpr.eu/events/EventTypeDetails.aspx?EventTypeID=5>

The individual who is selected will be expected to take an introductory course on applied multiple regression analysis and, ideally, a course on mathematics for social scientists or statistical software (e.g., STATA, SPSS). Other intermediate quantitative courses on multivariate regression, panel data

analysis, spatial econometrics, longitudinal data analysis, survival analysis, or multilevel modelling, for instance, will also be encouraged. The individual will also be allowed to take courses on geographic information systems (GIS) and spatial data and qualitative comparative analysis.

Please contact the Director of Doctoral Research for further information on this scholarship.

Further Research Support

A collection of “how to write a PhD” books located in the SOAS library discuss the process of doctoral research. Some are general guides (e.g. *The Research Student’s Guide to Success* or *The Postgraduate Research Handbook*), while others address more specific themes such as coping mechanisms, writing, etc. Doctoral Researchers are also encouraged to consult the offerings listed on SOAS’ *Research Students Portal* as well as the Politics Department Moodle site for Doctoral Researchers.

Library, Learning & Teaching Innovation (LLTI) provides all Doctoral Researchers and faculty staff with learning support and workshops throughout the year on various topics, such as writing skills, writing blocks, presentation skills, or time management. Drop-in sessions will also be held for Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) to answer queries you may have related to your teaching. For more information please visit the website: <https://www.soas.ac.uk/llti/>. In addition, the Doctoral School has a Doctoral Training Advisor (Dr Yenn Lee: y122@soas.ac.uk) who can be contacted for tips about School-wide research skills training courses for PhD candidates on offer.

Many Doctoral Researchers have benefited from *in-sessional English-language support* provided by SOAS. Courses include Academic Essay Writing, Reading and Note-taking, Seminar and Presentation Skills or Academic Vocabulary and Style. Also available to Doctoral Researchers are one-to-one tutorials, where individual English language or study skills concerns can be addressed with an English language expert. All courses and tutorials are available free of charge, though as they tend to be popular it is advisable to register for a course as early as possible. For more information see www.soas.ac.uk/insessionalenglish

The **Bloomsbury Postgraduate Skills Network** has been created by UCL for sharing best practice in generic and transferable skills training for Doctoral Researchers in the Bloomsbury area. The purpose is to allow Doctoral Researchers in participating institutions to expand their generic research skills and personal transferable skills through attending training courses and workshops at other member institutions. Registration for courses is via the website: <https://doctoral-skills.ucl.ac.uk/bloomsbury/>.

The Department collaborates with the Department of Politics at Birkbeck as a cluster within the

Bloomsbury Doctoral Training Centre (DTC). Together, we select three fully-funded (1+3 or +3) Doctoral Researchers each year, which are then also eligible to apply for further small grants (to support training and external collaboration). Additional short courses are provided by *other* (non-Bloomsbury) Doctoral Training Centres (e.g. UCL). For a list of courses please refer to the **National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM)** website: <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/training/>

XIII. GUIDELINES FOR WRITING A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

The research proposal is a vital part of the application and will be studied in detail by the academic selectors. The proposal should be around 2,000 words (plus bibliography) and include an outline of your proposed research topic, the research method, and the source materials you intend to use. It is beneficial if you make contact with an academic who shares your research interests prior to the submission of your application.

The **title** should offer a concise and accurate description of your research project.

The following points should be developed in the proposal:

1. Your main **thesis or research question**: explain in one paragraph what you will be exploring and what you will try to establish.
2. How **original** is your project and how **significant**: give your assessment of the existing literature on your topic and explain in what ways your own research will enrich the topic's scholarly knowledge. If that applies, explain what contribution to the general theoretical field you intend to bring through your specific research.
3. What **theoretical** view will inform your research: explain how you locate yourself in the theoretical field – both the field of social theory in general and the specific field to which your topic pertains – and what set of conceptual tools will inform your research.
4. How you will **develop** your thesis: how you plan to apply your theoretical and methodological approach, i.e. the main sections of the thesis that you envisage to write and the stages of your investigation:
 - a. the theoretical investigation (what literature you plan to survey and discuss)
 - b. the fieldwork: where, and how, i.e. what research methodology you intend to use, and how you will use it concretely (depending on your kind of research: archival and data resources, interviews, ethnography, etc.)
5. Your work **schedule**: explain how you intend to research and write your thesis within the three-year period allocated for a full-time PhD research (six years part-time).

Explain how you intend to **fund** your PhD years, whether through private funding or particular scholarship (clarify whether you have one, have applied, or intend to apply). Finally, attach a

bibliography focused on what is most relevant to your specific research topic and your theoretical and methodological approach.

For (information about) applying to pursue a Research Degree in the Politics Department please visit <https://www.soas.ac.uk/politics/programmes/phd/> and contact the Research Admissions Tutor Dr Michael Buehler (2023-24).

XIV. SOAS REGULATIONS FOR RESEARCH DEGREES (MPHIL/PHD)

Please refer to the latest Doctoral School regulations and guidelines here: <https://www.soas.ac.uk/about/governance/policies-and-procedures/regulations-and-quality-assurance/degree-regulations>

XV. POINTS OF CONTACT FOR RESEARCH STUDENTS

In the Department (apart from supervisory committee), and at the Doctoral School:

(a) Academic

- Director of Doctoral Research: Professor Salwa Ismail
- Research Admission Tutor: Dr Michael Buehler
- Head of Department: Professor Matt Nelson

(b) Administration

- The Politics Department is administered in Room MB221
- Postgraduate Student Support Officer: Ms Yvonne Henry
- Departmental Manager: Ms Sophie Elgood

(c) Doctoral School

- Head of the Doctoral School: Professor Rachel Harrison
- Deputy head of the Doctoral school: Dr Yenn Lee
- Academic Support Manager: Iona Taylor
- Student Support Officer: Muhammad Hussain (can be contacted on doctoralschool@soas.ac.uk)

For general rules, regulations and important forms please contact the Doctoral School website. For questions regarding facilities and resources provided by the Doctoral School (located in 53 Gordon Square) please email doctoralschool@soas.ac.uk or ask their staff in person. Current students can book a [Department & Student Support-Virtual meeting](#) (Tuesdays & Thursdays - 10.00 - 12.00), To do so click the link or call 0207 074 5070 (Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays - 10.00 - 16.00).

Note

This booklet was updated in September 2023. Every effort was made to ensure that the information was correct at the time of publication. The rules given in this document do NOT take precedence over those published in the SOAS Postgraduate Research Handbook. Please do feel free to let us know through the Doctoral Researcher representatives what sort of changes would help make this handbook more useful for you.