

Concept Notes

A concept paper/note is a brief paper written around a research question before undertaking the research. It can be seen as a pre-proposal document that is about two or three pages in length providing key details about the research, such as the question, purpose, and methods. The paper allows your supervisor or funders to gauge how well the you understand the research or whether the research is feasible and worth investigating. In certain cases, your supervisor may also decide that you should instead pursue a different research question from the one proposed. Outlined below are different types of concept notes with guiding questions.

Concept note about the research background and motivation.

This concept note seeks to clarify why you as a researcher are engaged in this research and explores your personal connection to the topic.

1. What is my study about?
2. How does it fit in the broader research context? *e.g. My study is aligned with the x / y approaches ...*
3. Why am I conducting this research? (personal / social / theoretical reasons)
4. What are some of the gaps that I wish to address through this research? *e.g. Some areas that need to be explored further are ...*
5. In what way will it contribute to the way we understand this particular phenomenon, or the discipline?

Concept note about the literature review.

This concept note engages with previous research on a topic, and maps and seeks patterns in the literature.

1. Who are the key theorists/ scholars in the field? How do they engage with one another? *e.g. Views differ on ... While theorist A argues that..., theorist B claims that...*
2. What are the key theories in the field? How are they linked / how do they differ?
3. Which of these theories are relevant for your study?
4. What are some of the gaps in the literature? *e.g. Some areas that need to be explored further are ...*
5. Which gap will your study address?
6. What are some key concepts you will use while undertaking this study?

Concept note about the research gap.

This concept note engages with previous research on a topic and seeks to identify gaps or omissions in the literature that your research might contribute to.

1. What are the theories that will be relevant for your study?
2. What are some of the gaps in the literature? *e.g. Some areas that need to be explored further are ...*
3. Which gap will your study address?
4. Which approaches will you adopt to address this gap?
5. Discuss the concepts that will be relevant to address this gap *E.g. Some useful concepts in this study are... The concept of x has been previously defined as... In this study, I will define x as ... This definition enhances our understanding of ...*

Concept note about a concept(s).

This concept note may explore a particular concept in detail, or may try to relate a number of key concepts to each other from the literature.

1. Introduce the concept by defining it
 2. Where does this concept originate? (historically, in which paradigm) *e.g. The concept of x has been previously defined as...*
3. How has this concept evolved?
4. How do different theorists/ scholars define and explain this concept? How are they similar? How do they differ?
5. Whose definition do you find most relevant for your study? Why? *e.g. In this study, I align myself with the definition of x as... This definition enhances our understanding of ... because...*
6. How will you use this concept in your study?
7. How do you intend to analyse/ examine/ measure it?

Concept note about relevance to society and/or social significance.

This concept note seeks to describe and locate the research problem in a social context.

1. Describe the social context in which this study is located
2. What are some problems / concerns in that context? *e.g. At present, we are faced with a situation/ crisis of... This has led to ...*
3. Which of these will your study address? *e.g. The study intends to ... in order to ...*
4. Why did you choose this problem in particular?
5. How will your study address this concern?
6. What are some key theorists/ scholars, theories and concepts you may use to address this problem?

7. What are you hoping to achieve through your research? *As a consequence of this study, we could alleviate / enhance / improve / better comprehend...*
8. Explain, broadly, how the research could contribute to social well-being.

Concept note about methods.

This concept note makes decisions about how a piece of research should proceed, i.e. the methods that will be employed to address one's research questions or a particular methodology.

1. Briefly, what are you seeking to research?
2. What type of research are you conducting? Qualitative / Quantitative / Mixed or other?
3. Which methodology (or combination of methodologies) would be most suitable for your study? Why did you choose this methodology?
4. Within this methodology, what are the actual methods you will employ?
5. What data you will collect? How will you collect data? What is your sample type and size?
6. How will you analyse the data? What methods/ tools of analysis/ heuristics would you use? Why did you opt for these?
7. How will your study respond to any of the following aspects: ethical considerations, validity, credibility, generalisability, confidentiality? (The relevance of these concepts will depend on your discipline. They may not all be applicable).
8. What would be the constraints and limitations of your methodology?

Adapted from Journeys in Research Writing Course Resource, 2018.

Compiled by Taahira Goolam Hoosen, 2024.