The application for admission to the ISS PhD Programme is a highly competitive process. For various institutional and logistical reasons there is a ceiling on the number of applicants we can admit each year. We pay close attention to at least three central aspects of an application: (a) high quality MA degree (or equivalent) in a relevant field, (b) very high quality, well developed, and well argued research proposal of around 5,000 words, and (c) good intellectual link to one of our Research Programmes. The research proposal is key to your successful application for admission to the PhD Programme. In the context where you also want to apply for scholarships, such as the Netherlands Fellowship Programme (NFP), having an excellent research proposal becomes even more crucial because applying for scholarships is extremely competitive.

A high quality research proposal for us means an intellectual project that has a great potential to make an important scientific contribution, researchable within a period of 3-4 years. We are interested in analytically ground-breaking, not purely descriptive, research projects. At the minimum, a proposal should clearly contain and explain: what is your project all about, why is it important theoretically, methodologically, and/or empirically (what is the problematic and what is your central research question), and how are you going to carry out your research. In short, tell us why you framed your central research question in a particular way and how do you plan to answer your key question within a period of 3-4 years. This can be elaborated further as follows:

(1) **Problematique.** Explain in detail what is the conceptual and/or empirical gap or puzzle that you are trying to explore. What is original in your proposed research? In answering this, avoid statements like “I am researching this topic because nobody has done it yet”. This is not good enough. Explain why your framing of the problematic is important, and why/how is it relevant to international scientific literature and/or policy choices. This section should also include (i) a concise, analytical review of the theoretical literature, relevant competing theories, and an explanation of the main analytical approaches likely to be pursued, (ii) a concise statement of the research issue, setting out the temporal, geographic and conceptual limits of the work, and (iii) potential contribution of the research to theory and/or, policy-making or public action.

(2) **Objectives and central research question.** A clearly stated central research question – linked to the discussion of the theoretical problematic and that is answerable within a period of 3-4 years. The latter are important too, although operational questions should be elaborated in the methodology section below. A working hypothesis or a ‘hunch’ is useful. Clearly explained objectives of the research are necessary.
(3) **Methodology.** What kind of data do you need to answer your central question, how are you going to collect this data, where and when? What research methodologies/research techniques are going to employ? Explain why these are most appropriate in helping you answer your central question. And how do you intend to fund your research?

(4) **Chapters overview.** Give us an indicative plan in terms of the full content and organization of your envisaged dissertation in a chapter overview section. Provide a few lines to explain each, and not just an enumeration of chapter titles. This plan is not a fixed commitment; you will almost certainly later change it. But it is an important indication that you have thought hard about what could be a realistic research project.

(5) **Bibliography.** Your bibliography provides a good indication of where you are coming from intellectually and which sets of scientific literature you are interested in. So, prepare this section with care.

(6) **Background.** After explaining to us your proposed research project, tell us a little more about the background of your interest in this intellectual project. We are keen to see whether and to what extent you are familiar with this topic; whether and to what extent you are networked in the field to pursue a serious project in a short period of time, etc. In short, tell us about your past/current association/relationship with this topic, partly to show that you can complete a high quality study within a period of 3-4 years.

Successful applicants are often those who have made prior contact with key scholars associated with one of the Research Programmes in ISS, and who have had productive exchange, before preparing their proposal or during its preparation, with ISS researchers who were prospective research supervision team members. Potential candidates may also find it useful to get in touch with ISS PhD researchers (see their website) – working on themes broadly related to their proposed research topic. We also encourage you to take a look at some sample research proposals by successful applicants (see our PhD Programme website).