

Applying for a PhD

A PhD is a challenging and substantial project and being clear about your motivation will help you succeed. Is your interest in the subject driving you? Do you need the qualification for a particular role? Do you have other reasons? Also consider the opportunity costs of studying a PhD and how it fits into the rest of your life.

Choosing your PhD route

In the UK there are three main routes into a PhD:

- PhD Studentships offered by a consortium of universities. These are sometimes four years (sometimes described as 1+3) and you rotate between projects in the first year before starting your own main project in the second;
- Advertised PhDs, where a researcher has secured funding for a specific project and is recruiting a PhD student to work on it with them;
- 'Bespoke' PhDs, where you propose the topic, find a supervisor and together seek funding.

The application process varies depending on the route you take.

How and when to apply

Most PhDs start in September or October but there are start times at other points in the year as well.

Finding the right supervisor is key to succeeding in your PhD. If you're planning to study in the sciences, it's more likely you'll be carrying out your research as part of an advertised project, so you'll need to research those leading the project. In arts, humanities and social sciences, or if you are pursuing the 'bespoke' route in the sciences, you will need to be pro-active. You'll need to identify an area of research you're interested in and draft a project proposal, before researching academics who could act as supervisors. Give yourself plenty of time to do this preparatory work, starting 12-18 months in advance of your preferred PhD start date.

Approach potential supervisors

In both instances, look at the publications of potential supervisors and find out about any PhD projects they're currently supervising, or have done in the past. Most University websites will have a directory of research staff willing to supervise and a listing of their research interests, so this is a good place to start your search. Doing this will allow you to see if there's anything in your area of interest they've worked on before. Consider your likely career ambitions post-PhD and how studying this PhD topic with this supervisor will help you achieve them.

You'll then need to get in touch with them. If they're in your institution you may be able to see them face-to-face to discuss your plans. Otherwise, send them an email telling them a bit about yourself, your research interests, how your ideas match with their expertise, why you would like them to supervise your project, and your ideas for sources of funding. Follow the institutional application process carefully and ensure that your CV complements your funding proposal. All your application documents need to send a strong message that you can complete your proposal research to the required academic standards and timeframes.

Funding

Funding postgraduate study is more complex than at undergraduate level, and it may be that you need to fund your study through a variety of smaller sources. Start by looking at the website of the institutions you're applying to, as they'll tell you whether there are any bursaries or Research Council Funding available. Around 15% of PhD students have a full scholarship, with most of these coming from a Research Council or research charity. For a list of all UK Research Councils, see www.ukri.org as well as www.jobs.ac.uk and www.findaphd.com.

Find out the deadlines for funding schemes you are interested in. Many run parallel to the application window for PhDs (January-May) but others might be open at different times.

The funding available to you will differ according to the subject you're studying. Employers may be willing to fund study in engineering and the sciences, while some charities and organisations offer grants and scholarships across a range of disciplines.

www.postgraduatefunding.com is a good source of information on smaller awards, while if you're an international student, your home country may offer funding in various forms. Also use your careers department and speak to academics within your subject to see if they're aware of any funding sources, particularly if you're applying to the same institution.

Writing a research proposal

Your subject area will affect whether you'll need to write a research proposal. In the sciences, many PhD students are working on pre-defined projects. In the arts, humanities and social sciences these are far less common, so you'll usually need to write your own proposal. These are also known as a "case for support" if external funding is sought.

Although there is no exact format, research proposals tend to have similar structures. Consider the following:

- Formulate your problem or identified gap as a question. This will be what makes up the core of your research.
- Set aims and objectives. The aims are the principal directions and themes of your work. The objectives are the specific outcomes you will achieve.

- Demonstrate an awareness of the academic literature available around the project and the question you have set.
- Demonstrate the stages of your research, showing how you will organise your work and achieve your key objectives. For full-time research this will be 3–4 years and for part-time 7–8 years. Explain how you will use this time. This will show you've given real thought to your potential studies.
- Outline how you're going to answer your research question. What methods will you use and how have you chosen them? If relevant, what materials will you work with?

Your supervisor will usually work with you to refine your funding proposal but in initial discussions with potential supervisors you should demonstrate you have done the initial research on funding

Further resources

FindaPhD

www.findaphd.com

A guide to current postgraduate research and PhD studentships with lots of valuable guidance as well as advertised opportunities

Jobs.ac.uk

www.jobs.ac.uk

For studentships and research assistant posts

Postgraduate Studentships

www.postgraduatestudentships.co.uk

A guide to postgraduate funding opportunities

Research Councils UK

www.ukri.org

Partnership of the UK's seven Research Councils, with links to each Council's website

Times Higher Education

www.timeshighereducation.co.uk

For studentships and research assistant posts

Vitae

www.vitae.ac.uk

Resources, information and advice on professional development and careers for postgraduate research students

This resource is available in alternative formats.

Please contact your careers service or email careersgroup@careers.lon.ac.uk