Applying for a PhD – Useful Careers Resources (for PhDs in the UK only)

Should you do a PhD?

Before you apply for a PhD it is worth considering these questions:

- What is your objective or where do you want the PhD to lead you?
- If you have a specific career or employer in mind have you investigated whether or not having a PhD will help you?
- Are you interested in a career in academia or research? If so a PhD is likely to be a requirement.
- Are you happy working alone on a project for a considerable length of time (depending on the type of PhD, 3 to 4 years of full-time study or 6 to 8 years of part-time study)?
- Do you enjoy conducting your own research?
- What are the entry requirements? For example a Master’s is usually required for arts PhDs.

If you are unsure of your answers to these questions then you might want to check out the [www.findaphd.com/](http://www.findaphd.com/) website, which outlines issues to think about – Why do a PhD?

You may also wish to look at the previous destinations of postgraduate researchers nationally. See: What do Researchers Do? [www.vitae.ac.uk/impact-and-evaluation/what-do-researchers-do](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/impact-and-evaluation/what-do-researchers-do) – this also includes career profiles and stories of researchers.

You can also investigate the destinations of postgraduate researchers from individual departments at specific UK universities as these are usually available on university Employability & Careers Centre websites. You can check some of the destinations of postgraduate researchers from the University of Surrey on the Employability & Careers Centre website, click on ‘What do Surrey Graduates Do?’ [http://www.surrey.ac.uk/careers/current/surreygraduates/index.htm](http://www.surrey.ac.uk/careers/current/surreygraduates/index.htm)

Furthermore, you are welcome to book a careers appointment in order to discuss your career ideas. Phone the Employability & Careers Centre on 01483 689001/2, or call in to see us in the Employability & Careers Centre, Philip Marchant Building, next
to the Accommodation Service. The Employability & Careers Centre is open 9am - 5pm Monday to Friday.

If you don’t know the entry requirements for careers that interest you, you can research them using:

- Prospects – https://www.prospects.ac.uk/job-profiles

If you don’t know which careers interest you, try reading our Getting Started leaflet and use some of the suggested online tools to generate ideas.

How to choose a PhD

It is difficult to generalise about this because arts and science PhDs and how they come about are often very different. You will need to think carefully about the subject of your thesis to make sure that you can sustain an interest in it for at least three or four years. Primarily you should look for or construct a project which inspires you; however, you will also need to think about which department you want to work in and whether or not you could work well with the supervisor or principal investigator. Finding a good supervisor is vital – someone who will help you to meet your research goals. You should also look at the institution’s other resources for supporting you through your PhD, such as the library facilities and training opportunities for research postgraduates.

The AGCAS leaflet About postgrad study has a section on ‘How do I pick a research programme?’ The e-book – ‘Should I do a PhD?’: http://www.jobs.ac.uk/careers-advice/resources/ebooks-and-toolkits/should-i-do-a-phd has a really useful section on ‘What you need to know about your PhD before you start.’ You may find it useful to look at the rankings for institutions and their departments. You can use these websites to find out more:

- Unistats – search by university and course http://unistats.direct.gov.uk
- The Times Higher Education Supplement, World University Rankings www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings

Finding PhDs

The following websites list opportunities:

- Prospects – www.prospects.ac.uk/search_courses.htm
- FindAPhD – www.findaphd.com includes PhDs in other countries.
- Postgrad – www.postgrad.com includes European postgraduate courses.
- Jobs.ac.uk – www.jobs.ac.uk this is the leading job board for careers in academic research, science and related professions, but it also includes adverts for funded PhDs.
- International Graduate – Search for PhDs in other countries according to subject area and region www.internationalgraduate.net
You can also try making a speculative approach to academics who are involved in areas of research which interest you, especially if you are devising the project yourself. Certain specialist publications such as Nature and New Scientist also carry advertisements for PhDs.

Making Applications for PhDs

There is no central admissions system for most PhD programmes so candidates submit an application directly to the university, although some universities use the UCAS postgraduate centralised system https://www.ucas.com/ucas/postgraduate. The exception to this is for some vocational doctorate courses such as the doctorates in Clinical and Educational Psychology, where clearing houses exist. It is always worth checking the PhD application procedure with the individual university concerned. You may be asked to complete an application form, attach a CV and write a research proposal. It is important to contact the supervisor or department to find out more information about the proposed research before you apply, so that you have a clearer understanding of the research and of your suitability. You can then tailor your research proposal or personal statement accordingly. However this would not be the approach if you are applying for an arts PhD where you are putting together the research proposal yourself. In order to do a PhD you will need good academic references.

It is worth applying early for PhD studentships - the autumn of the previous year is recommended. A studentship is a grant of money, which can be used for fees, living expenses or both. However, other funded and self-funded PhDs can start at any time of the year, so keep applying.

Some useful websites for help with the application process include:

- FindAPhD: [http://www.findaphd.com/advice/finding/](http://www.findaphd.com/advice/finding/) Everything you need to know about applying for Doctoral Study
- Advice on starting a doctorate and writing a research proposal: [www.vitae.ac.uk/doing-research/doing-a-doctorate/starting-a-doctorate](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/doing-research/doing-a-doctorate/starting-a-doctorate)
- The departmental website of the particular university often provides application advice. For example, at the University of Surrey, this is the information provided by FASS on how to write a research proposal: [www.surrey.ac.uk/sites/default/files/phd_proposal_guidance.pdf](http://www.surrey.ac.uk/sites/default/files/phd_proposal_guidance.pdf)
- University of Manchester’s Careers Service website – help with study applications: [www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/applicationsinterviews/studyapplication](http://www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/applicationsinterviews/studyapplication)

Help with interviews:

- FindAPhD: [www.findaphd.com/advice/finding/phd-interview.aspx](http://www.findaphd.com/advice/finding/phd-interview.aspx)
- AGCAS, About postgrad study has a section on example interview questions.
- The Postgrad: [www.postgrad.com/editorial/advice/phd/interview_dos_and_donts/](http://www.postgrad.com/editorial/advice/phd/interview_dos_and_donts/)
Questions are likely to focus on your academic background, your motivation, your relevant experience and skills, how you would deliver the project and your future ambitions. You will also be given the opportunity to ask your own questions.

Funding
Funding can come from various sources, such as Research Councils, university scholarships, professional bodies and societies, charities, foundations, trusts, employers and overseas governments. Funding for PhDs is usually allocated to the department so it is worth speaking to the prospective department and PhD supervisor to see what funding is available. The main source of funding for UK and currently also for EU students comes from the Research Councils. These are:

- **AHRC** Arts and Humanities Research Council: [www.ahrc.ac.uk](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk)
- **BBSRC** Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council: [www.bbsrc.ac.uk](http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk)
- **EPSRC** Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council: [www.epsrc.ac.uk](http://www.epsrc.ac.uk)
- **ESRC** Economic and Social Research Council: [www.esrc.ac.uk](http://www.esrc.ac.uk)
- **MRC** Medical Research Council: [www.mrc.ac.uk](http://www.mrc.ac.uk)
- **NERC** Natural Environment Research Council: [www.nerc.ac.uk](http://www.nerc.ac.uk)
- **STFC** Science and Technology Facilities Council: [www.stfc.ac.uk](http://www.stfc.ac.uk)

Grants of money are usually called ‘studentships’ and can be used for fees, living expenses or both. Studentships can be allocated in two different ways:

- The Research Councils allocate a number of studentships to university departments who then advertise for candidates. This is how the majority of science courses are funded.
- A joint application is made to the Research Council by the candidate and their institution. This may apply to arts, economics and social science programmes. Competition for this type of funding is very high.

**UK PhD Loans** – In the UK 2016 budget it was announced that Doctoral loans of up to £25,000 will be introduced in 2018 for English students at any UK university who are without full Research Council funding for more information see: [https://www.findaphd.com/funding/guides/uk-phd-loans-scheme.aspx](https://www.findaphd.com/funding/guides/uk-phd-loans-scheme.aspx)

Useful websites and information resources
Prospects website: [www.prospects.ac.uk/search_funding_bodies.htm](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/search_funding_bodies.htm) and Postgraduate Funding Guide [www.prospects.ac.uk/funding](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/funding)

- The Alternative Guide to postgraduate Funding – book available from Employability & Careers Centre Careers Library
- Hotcourses Scholarship search: [www.scholarship-search.org.uk](http://www.scholarship-search.org.uk)
- Research Councils UK: [www.rcuk.ac.uk](http://www.rcuk.ac.uk)
- FindAPhD Funding Guide: [www.findaphd.com/funding/guides/phd-funding-guide.aspx](http://www.findaphd.com/funding/guides/phd-funding-guide.aspx)
- [http://www.thinkpostgrad.com/](http://www.thinkpostgrad.com/) - information on studentships
Study Overseas
Some universities also fund graduates through teaching assistantships, particularly in the USA, where it is possible to earn money by teaching undergraduate students. Many governments offer opportunities for funding for very able students from other countries. Look on the relevant government or country’s embassy website for details. There are also many trust funds and charities with specific target groups so it is worth checking these out in the Grants Register, which is available in the Employability & Careers Centre.