

Applying for a PhD

Before you apply for a PhD you should reflect on your reasons for doing so. Is it your interest in the subject driving you? Do you need the qualification for a particular role? Are there any other reasons? A PhD is a challenging and substantial project and being clear about your motivation will help you succeed.

Approach potential supervisors

Choosing the right supervisor is key to succeeding in your application for a PhD, as well as in the 3-4 years you'll be studying if your application is successful. 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, 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.

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 listing 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.

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, and why you would like them to supervise your project.

When to apply

Most PhD studentships start in September or October. Deadlines for applications vary, but many open around January and close around April for a same-year start. Other funded and self-funded PhDs can start at any time of year though, so you should begin the process of applying as soon as you have identified potential supervisors and have a clear idea of your research proposal.

The application

Each institution will have its own application process, so check the website of each thoroughly before applying. Typically, it will involve an application form with information on your qualifications and employment history, details of modules studied in your existing degree(s), and details of dissertations and research projects – if these have been published, include the reference. Even if it's not definite yet, you'll need to state how you intend to fund your PhD. You may also be asked to write a statement explaining why you want to carry out your research, along with a research proposal.

Most UK universities ask students to register for the degree MPhil in the first instance. You'll then go through an upgrade process after around a year, and provided your work is judged to be of a necessary standard, you'll transfer to a PhD.

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, most 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?

There are various books that may help you prepare your research proposal. Check with your university's library to see if they stock any.

Further resources

- FindaPhD – a guide to current postgraduate research and PhD studentships – www.findaphd.com
- Jobs.ac.uk – For studentships and research assistant posts – www.jobs.ac.uk
- Postgraduate Studentships – A guide to postgraduate funding opportunities – www.postgraduatestudentships.com
- Research Councils UK – Partnership of the UK's seven Research Councils, with links to each Council's website – www.ukri.org/
- Times Higher Education – For studentships and research assistant posts – www.timeshighereducation.co.uk
- Vitae – Resources, information and advice on professional development and careers for postgraduate research students – www.vitae.ac.uk