

# The PhD journey: A guide to applying, starting and succeeding

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*To postgraduates, a PhD may seem like an ideal opportunity to improve research skills prior to future work. However, the application process is a competitive and often challenging experience. This article seeks to de-mystify some of the common questions surrounding PhD applications and provide some hints and tips for potential applicants.*

## 1. Is a PhD for you?

An increasing number of postgraduates are applying for PhD study to develop their academic and professional skills (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014). However, before you begin to consider searching for positions, you must be fully aware of what studying for a PhD actually entails. A PhD is the highest degree a person can achieve. It will involve around three years' full-time (up to six years' part-time) work, culminating in a thesis of somewhere around 80,000 words. It is research-intensive, with you developing and leading projects and writing papers in your chosen field of study. Although you will have the support of two or more specialist supervisors, a PhD is by-and-large independent work. Unlike any Research Assistant roles you may have previously undertaken, you often will not have a research team working alongside you. The onus will be on you to drive forward your research and meet self-defined deadlines and goals. Importantly, a PhD in Psychology does not automatically include Chartered Psychologist status. You may have to make extra arrangements to accumulate achievements towards these different qualifications alongside your research work.

Does a PhD fit in with your future career plans? It is important to be aware that the PhD experience is an innately challenging experience and not to be chosen lightly. You must ensure that you have the confidence and composure to navigate yourself through various obstacles during your research journey. There are many resources to help you decide if a PhD is right for you (e.g. QAA, 2011). Speaking to colleagues, friends or academic supervisors who have experienced the process is a great place to start. Also there are a range of social media (@PsyPAG, @ECPsych) and blogs ([www.thesiswhisperer.com](http://www.thesiswhisperer.com)) covering all aspects of the post-graduate research experience. It is important to remember that every PhD journey is different. Don't let the experiences of one person rule your decision – try to choose according to what suits you best.

## 2. Identify your research interests

There is really only one golden rule in choosing your PhD research area: *ensure that you are passionate about the research project!* You will be studying this topic from all angles, at varying hours of the day for the next three years, at a minimum. You will be researching the unknown in this area. It should indeed form the basis of your future career. It is a big decision and one that you must not take lightly. Think carefully about what you enjoyed in your undergraduate and post-graduate studies, as well as in any work experience. What are the gaps in the literature? What excites you? What research questions keep you awake at night?

### **3. Where to search?**

The approach you take to searching for a PhD place will likely depend on what you intend to study. If your interests are broad, it is good to start with PhD vacancy websites such as [www.findaphd.com](http://www.findaphd.com) and [www.jobs.ac.uk](http://www.jobs.ac.uk). These provide a range of funded and unfunded vacancies. Try not to be put off by 'unfunded' places. There are often other funding sources available but this is something worth exploring with the university and supervisors. However, already-funded PhD places are usually an easier place to start.

If you have a specific research question, department or research group in mind, it is best to contact potential supervisors directly. Don't be embarrassed to do this. The relationship between PhD student and supervisor is highly reciprocal: you receive guidance, whilst they receive publications with less effort than working alone. You should also browse the websites of individual universities you are interested in. There may post-PhD vacancies here and not elsewhere. It is best practice to cast a wide search net!

Whatever your approach, make sure that you investigate the department and university who would host you thoroughly. Although somewhat controversial, the Research Excellence Framework (REF; Research Excellence Framework, 2014) is a good place to start. This assesses the quality of research output across various metrics. Also, make sure to speak to academic staff and current PhD students to understand both the research and social atmosphere.

### **4. Recruitment process**

Potential supervisors want to find a person who has confidence and composure to continue in the face of adversity and complete the PhD. They want someone who is motivated, organised, committed and passionate about research. After applying for a doctoral position, you will usually be invited to an interview. Typically your supervisory panel, a member of the Graduate School, and an internal member of staff will interview you. Here, you may be asked questions such as: Why do you want to undertake a PhD? What has brought you to this position? Why are you interested in the proposed research? What original contribution to knowledge will your research make? It is not unusual to have to prepare a presentation about your proposed research. If you are applying for a studentship, you may have to undertake teaching activities. Make sure that you acknowledge this in your presentation, and aim to present your research in a way that is suitable to an undergraduate audience. Of course, the interview is also the place for you to ask questions. Think about what aspects of the project, supervisory panel, department and university you are unclear on and come prepared!

### **5. Starting out.**

Congratulations! You've secured a competitive PhD place. Now what's next? First, you may have to apply for ethical approval for your research projects, depending on the nature of your PhD. It is essential that you submit your ethics application(s) in a timely manner, as departmental and faculty ethical approval can be quite time consuming.

Second, it is beneficial to participate in any training offered to you and the social functions provided. At times, a PhD can be a lonely journey, so it is good to create a research community, comprising of other postgraduate students who you can share your experiences and triumphs with, but also your doubts and problems (see Jolley et al., 2015, this book). See your PhD as an apprenticeship: you are here to learn and train to be a reputable and independent researcher.

Third, set a precedence with your supervisors and arrange regular meetings to ensure that they are up to date with your research activities. It is advantageous to record meeting notes, which you can utilise in your viva examinations and any annual appraisals you may have. Many universities also have doctoral school training programmes that encourage you to log all meet-

ings and training that you receive. You should also try to make the most of the training they provide and ensure your professional development occurs alongside your research. Useful information on the breadth of skills expected in a modern day researcher can be found in the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (Vitae, 2015).

## 6. Useful tips

- Conduct a systematic literature review before, or during, data collection. This will greatly shape the way in which your research will progress and can help identify key gaps in the literature.
- Stay up-to-date with the literature. Even when you are conducting your systematic literature review, your research area will be expanding and developing. After finalising your systematic literature review, continue to check the journal databases as there may be newly published studies that you have missed. It is important to remain up-to-date throughout your PhD. You need to be the expert in your area, and this will come from reading, reading and... reading.
- Attend conferences. This will increase your confidence in disseminating your research, and will allow you to create contacts that may be useful in future study and may open up employment opportunities. You will also receive feedback about your research that will greatly enhance and improve your final thesis.
- Aim to publish. A key component of a PhD, and something that will be addressed in your progression viva, is: 'Is this research of publishable quality?' If you have published your doctoral research then this is all the evidence you need. Indeed, publishing your research can be a difficult task. Manuscript rejections can be painful, but you will soon build resilience. Getting your articles reviewed is beneficial, even if the final decision is a rejection, as you will receive feedback about your work and recommendations, from leading experts in your research field.
- Compartmentalise your time: Allocate periods of time to specific tasks, perhaps using a Gantt chart (The Research Whisperer, 2011). Over the course of your doctoral studies you will be required to undertake many research activities such as collecting and analysing data, writing literature reviews, writing and presenting conference presentations, and of course, submitting your 80,000 (approximately) word thesis. Planning ahead will help you keep focused on both your immediate and future goals.
- Keep a sense of perspective (Kaye, 2013). Remember why you are undertaking a PhD and be mindful of the huge achievement that will come from submitting. This will motivate you in more difficult times. It may be useful to enlist others to remind you of this perspective, particularly at times when motivation dips (see Jolley et al., 2015, this book)
- Try to maintain a healthy work-life balance. It is important that you look after your mental health. Get involved in other activities that allow you take to a break from your PhD. These do not have to be academic (see Zhou, 2015, this book). Set and maintain breaks for social occasions and relaxation: your productivity and research outputs will benefit from this.

There now follows our (the authors') experiences of our PhD journey.

### **Charlotte Pennington**

#### **PhD Student, Edge Hill University**

Everyone's experience of applying, and undertaking, a PhD is unique. In part, this is what makes a PhD so exciting as people have their own story to share. I applied for a doctoral student position at Edge Hill University in the summer of 2013, whilst still undertaking my undergraduate degree. When I first started my undergraduate degree I was knowledgeable to a range of options that I could pursue after graduating. By the time third year came along,

these options weren't as salient in my mind, as I was, at the time, tackling my dissertation. Then I heard about the opportunity to undertake one of 12 studentships at my university. A studentship can typically involve conducting your PhD research alongside teaching duties. The application process involved submitting a 2000-word research proposal, and an academic CV. The first thing you should note here is that I did not have a Master's degree. The second important thing is that, at the time, my CV was not particularly academic. Indeed, I had four years of clinical experience under my belt, which was greatly beneficial, but I lacked expertise in research and teaching. If you have the passion, commitment and enthusiasm for research, then this should be your main reason for applying for a doctoral position. A good mind-set to achieve is to think of a doctoral degree as a learning process; you are being trained to conduct rigorous, high quality research.

After passing the initial selection process, I was then invited to an interview. I had to present my research proposal in a way that was accessible to undergraduate students. I proposed my own personal choice of research: you can often apply to a research degree with a pre-arranged research proposal or your own research idea. In both cases, it is essential that you select supervisors whom are dedicated and knowledgeable in the field. After successfully securing my doctoral position, I was required to conduct a 15,000-word research proposal and undertake a registration viva examination. Again, this highlights the diversity of universities offering PhD candidacy. However, conducting a systematic review of the literature for my final research proposal, and obtaining ethical approval at this early stage greatly helped to outline and organise my research. Reflecting back, now in my second year of studies, I have deeply enjoyed my doctoral studies so far. Pivotal to this, is the way in which this experience has shaped me as a person. I have become more confident and independent, travelling to many different places to present my research. I have developed a critical eye and appreciation for high quality research. I am more of an inquisitive person than I was before: questions need to be asked in order for us to advance knowledge and become pioneers of our generation. You could be that person!

**Emma Norris**

**PhD Student, University College London.**

After enjoying being involved in various research projects during my earlier studies, I was always set on undertaking a PhD. What was more uncertain was exactly what I wanted to research! I've always had a broad range of interests around health psychology and behaviour change and so found it very hard to whittle down my search. In searching various websites and making enquiries to potential supervisors, I attended two interviews and was unsuccessful. Rejection is common in the highly competitive PhD market – one interview was lost by the difference of one publication in one case. The PhD I ended up securing was a fully-funded, four year UCL studentship with no teaching requirement. This is a multidisciplinary project with supervisors across public health, epidemiology and educational psychology and a very specific title and aim.; hence very different from Lottie's experience where she crafted her own proposal. After my initial application, I had an interview with all four (!) of my supervisors and the departmental Graduate Tutor. I then had a final interview and had to prepare a mock-up school recruitment presentation for the study. Looking back now, the rejections that I experienced have worked to my favour. UCL is where I studied my MSc, in commuting distance to my home and one of the top universities in the field of behaviour change. Location, familiarity and reputation are all essential to consider when making your own PhD choices. I am enjoying leading my own scheme of study and having the flexibility to take on additional teaching and extra-curricular activities (such as PsyPAG).

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