So, you’ve decided that study at PhD level is right for you. What next?

Approach prospective supervisors

Identifying the best supervisor for you is key to your PhD search. If you are planning a PhD in the sciences, then it is more likely you will be applying to carry out your research with an advertised project, and will need to research those leading that 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 the experts in the field who could act as supervisors. Look at the publications of potential supervisors to see what they have published in your area of interest. It’s also worth finding out about any PhD projects they are currently supervising, or have done in the past.

You will then need to get in touch with these supervisors. If they are in your institution, you may be able to see them face-to-face. If they are elsewhere, send them an email telling them a bit about 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/October. Deadlines for applications to studentships vary, but many open around January and close around April in the year the studentship will start. However, other funded and self-funded PhDs can start at any time of year. 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 for PhD study. This will usually 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 you have been published, include the reference. You will need to state how you intend to fund the PhD (even if it’s not definite at this stage). Finally, you may be asked to write a statement explaining why you want to carry out your research and a research proposal.

Most UK universities ask students to register for the degree of MPhil in the first instance. You will then usually go through an ‘upgrade’ process after about a year, and if your work is judged to be of the necessary standard you will transfer to a PhD.
Writing a research proposal

Whether or not you will need to write a research proposal will depend on your subject area. In the sciences, most PhD students work on pre-defined projects where someone else has come up with the original proposal. In the arts, humanities and social sciences, these types of projects are less common and you will usually need to write your own proposal.

Although there is no prescribed format, research proposals across all subjects have similar structures. If external funding is sought, then it is often known as ‘case for support’. Consider the following:

> Formulate your problem or identified ‘gap’ in the current research as a question.
> 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 around the project itself and the question you have set.
> Define the stages of your research, showing how you will organise your work and the achievement of your key objectives. For full-time research this will be 3-4 years and for part-time 7 to 8 years. Explain how you will use this time period.
> Outline how you are 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?

The following books are widely available from bookshops and libraries and may help in preparing your research proposal (and doing your research degree):


FURTHER SOURCES

> 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.postgraduateships.com
> Research Councils UK – Partnership of the UK’s seven Research Councils, with links to each Council’s website – www.rcuk.ac.uk
> 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

Notes