

THINKING ABOUT A PhD?

This leaflet offers information and advice to students who are considering doing a PhD. It is aimed at undergraduates, taught postgraduates or graduates who are thinking of returning to study. It is intended to help you to start to investigate whether or not a PhD is the right option for you. There is a resource section at the end of the leaflet which will help you to look at some of the areas covered in more depth.

What is a PhD?

A PhD is the highest academic qualification available in the UK and it involves three to four years of original research on a specific topic. By undertaking a PhD you will be contributing to the development of knowledge in your subject.

There are a number of different types of PhD some related to particular professions, for example engineering and medicine, and also ones which include a first year of study at Masters level.

Differences between a Research Degree and an Undergraduate or Taught Postgraduate Course

The main difference is in the final word of the heading. In a research degree you will not undertake a set course of study with a curriculum to follow, lectures to attend, supported by a reading and resource list. You will have to take responsibility for managing your own learning and achieving your PhD. There are, of course, support systems in the form of your supervisor, other academic colleagues and peers but it is your responsibility to plan and manage your work, to seek help and support when you need it, and to overcome difficulties and setbacks. You will need to be prepared for what some call, "the loneliness of research". Whilst there may be other researchers in your department or school you will all be working on different topics so the "camaraderie" associated with an undergraduate or masters group of students is not replicated in a PhD.

Why Do You Want to Do a PhD?

There are many reasons that people give for undertaking a PhD, some are better than others, but you should think seriously about your reasons and find out as much as you can about what a PhD involves before you commit yourself. Research degrees are rewarding but tough and you will encounter periods of self-doubt and difficulties, being able to focus clearly on your original motivation and having a realistic view of what a PhD is will help you to get through these times.

Good reasons include:

- A real and genuine commitment to the topic you want to research
- Enjoyment of the research process
- Knowing how and why it will enhance your career ambitions

Bad Reasons include:

Because I don't want to leave university yet
I don't know what I want to do so I'll delay the decision
My boyfriend/girlfriend is staying in Nottingham....

Many prospective PhD students have been approached by a tutor or final year project supervisor, whilst this may be very flattering, they obviously think you have the academic qualities to undertake a PhD, do stop and think about what a PhD involves and if it really is what you want to do.

Funding a PhD

The main sources of research funding in the UK are the government, through the Research Councils, charities and industry. Getting a funded place or sponsorship through the research councils, a relevant charity or industry for your PhD is competitive. Funding via the Research Councils is also subject to eligibility requirements, but there are other awards which are specifically for international students. You need to research this thoroughly and the resource section at the end of the leaflet will offer a useful starting point.

Self funding a PhD is expensive and you must consider this very carefully, remember that you have to live somewhere for three to four years, as well as paying your fees. There are also opportunities to do a part-time PhD and for some who have already embarked on a career this may be part of their professional development and supported by their employer. Others may take this option as part of a career change. A part time PhD will normally take six years to complete and anyone considering this option should think seriously about the time commitment involved and the impact on their work/life balance.

Application Process

There is no central admissions system for research degrees. University departments will advertise the vacancies they have for PhD research degrees and they will receive and assess the applications they receive. Advertisements will appear internally on departmental notice boards and on the University's vacancies bulletins (often on-line via the Human Resources department). You may be approached directly by a supervisor who has a research grant and has a vacancy, this does not automatically mean the place is yours but it is good to have the support of a supervisor.

There are some differences in the application procedure between academic disciplines but generally you will complete an application form and include a personal statement or an outline research proposal, if short-listed you will then attend an interview and if successful be offered a place. If you have not yet secured funding then this offer will be subject to your being able to satisfy this requirement.

In the sciences, engineering and technology you may not need to submit a research proposal but will write a statement about why you wish to contribute to the area under investigation. In the arts and social sciences you may need to generate a research idea and be able to present this as a proposal in your written application. The books on the resource list contain more information on choosing a research topic and preparing a supporting statement or proposal.

A PhD interview covers your interest in the research area and your commitment to a PhD. Some typical questions may be:

“What do you think a PhD entails?”

“Tell me what led to your interest in ... and about any work you have already done on this area?”

“Why do you think you are suited to doing a PhD?”

Attributes of Successful PhDs

Are you:

Intelligent	Imaginative	Methodical	Confident
Curious	Thorough	Independent	Dedicated
Well-organised	Original	Dynamic	Ambitious

These are some of the attributes you will need to have, or be able to develop, if you are going to be successful and enjoy your PhD.

Some other things to think about:

If you are an arts or humanities student do you like working alone for long periods of time?

If you are a scientist or engineer you may have to fit in your experimental work around the needs of others in your group, this may mean an unusual working pattern.

Whatever your subject can you take disappointment and rise to a challenge especially when your research does not go as you planned?

Are you able to take criticism and defend your point of view, academic challenge is part of a PhD?

A Final Thought

“Your doctorate is going to be hard work. But that does not mean that it won’t be fun. There will always be tough times when you wonder why you began the whole crazy idea. But deep down you will know why you are doing this. You want that doctorate. One day you will be able to write “Dr” in front of your name. That title will mean you have achieved something significant.”

Resources

Books and Leaflets

The PhD Application Handbook. Peter J Bentley. Open University Press ISBN 0-335-21952-7

How to Get a PhD. Estelle M Phillips and Derek S Pugh Open University Press ISBN 0-335-21684-6

Getting Your PhD. Harriet Churchill & Teela Sanders Sage Publications ISBN 978-1-4129-1994-4

Postgraduate study and research AGCAS Graduate Prospects –

www.prospects.ac.uk/links/PGStudy

Postgraduate Funding Guide The Essential Guide to Funding Further Study 2007/08 – Prospects Booklet Copies available in CCD Resource Area

What Next? – Options After Your Masters or PhD - CCD Resource leaflet

Useful websites

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/gradschool/> - Nottingham University Graduate School website

www.rcuk.ac.uk – UK Research Councils. Information on funding, applications and eligibility.

www.grad.ac.uk – UKGRAD. This is the main website for PhDs but is worth looking at as part of your initial research.

www.findaphd.com – searchable database of PhD opportunities and useful background on what a PhD involves and the application procedures. It also has a specific section on PhD life which includes a useful article for Arts and Humanities PhDs

<http://univ.cc/> - worldwide listing of universities

<http://www.npc.org.uk/> - website of the National Postgraduate Committee which represents the interests of postgraduates in the UK