

Thinking about doing a PhD?

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This brief guide aims to give potential PhD applicants some general ideas of how to prepare a PhD application. The concept ‘Doctor of Philosophy’ (usually abbreviated to ‘PhD’) is the highest degree students can obtain from universities. Nowadays, it has become a requirement for many academic careers and research jobs, such as university lecturers and researchers. In general, successful applicants are expected to complete an undergraduate degree with at least upper second-class honours or a Masters degree (see below for detailed information about taught and research Masters degrees) before embarking on a PhD. Exact requirements for PhD applications may vary from university to university, so you should check the entry requirements before you apply. The easiest place to find information about postgraduate research degrees is on individual university websites. There is no central applications process for research degrees.

Do a Masters degree first

The benefits of doing a Master’s degree

There are a number of benefits to completing a Masters degree before embarking on a PhD. Firstly, a Master’s degree may enhance your employability by making your CV more competitive. Secondly, Masters study involves developing more independent and critical learning skill than an undergraduate degree, so it can largely improve your ability to analyse and solve academic questions independently. Thirdly, Masters programmes can be very flexible; there are a wide range of study options available for people who are interested in doing a Masters degree. For example, many universities offer part time models, evening classes and online study in order to increase the flexibility of Masters study, some institutions, like Keele University offer LLM and MA programmes that are taught in ‘blocks’ of three days, making it easier to combine work and study. Last but not least, a Masters degree can be the first step towards undertaking a PhD project or any academic careers. During the one or two years of a Masters programme, you can have a close look at the ‘real research world’, so you will be more clear about whether an academic life is really what you want. Inevitably the study skills you learn from Masters study can help you to run your PhD smoothly.

Should I do a Taught Masters or a Research Masters?

When you make up your mind to do a Masters degree, you probably should start to think which type of Masters programmes would suit you – taught or research. A taught Masters course normally lasts 12 months full time. Taught Masters include more taught than research components. You are expected to attend teaching sessions, read articles/books, discuss with your peers in seminars and complete module essays and a dissertation. In a taught Masters programme, you should take a more pro-active role in your learning than that you did at undergraduate level, do more research on your own and write longer assignments. If you are not very confident about your ability to undertake PhD research, doing a taught Masters degree first will usually be a good idea. You will receive some research training which may be helpful when starting your PhD in future. Furthermore, you will know better whether you have the ability to manage an even more difficult research degree after studying a taught Masters programme.

Research Masters programmes are suitable for students who enjoy intensive research and a more independent approach to working towards their Masters degree without the constraints of fixed teaching sections and lectures.¹ Research Masters is an advanced postgraduate degree available in a range of academic disciplines. They are different from taught Masters Degrees, because they provide students with a broad appreciation of research methods and methodology which involves an understanding of the uses and limitations of different research methods.² Research Masters programmes include both research methods training in the relevant discipline and a substantial research project. They allow participants to develop 'generic research knowledge and skills whilst pursuing a subject-based research project'.³

The choice between taught and research masters programmes is an individual one, but remember that research training is an important part of doing a PhD, and if you complete some of this before you embark on your doctoral studies, you might be able to apply for exemptions from some research training elements of your research degree, giving you more time to focus on your on research.

Tuition fees, living expenses and funding opportunities

Masters tuition fees may vary slightly from subject to subject and university to university. Generally, for home and EU students, it is about £3, 500 per year for full time and £1,800 for part time; for international students, it is about £9,500 for full time and £4, 200 for part time. Living expenses may also vary according to university locations. Normally, university postgraduate websites provide a helpful guide to tuition fees and living expense. You can visit these websites for more detailed information about how much you may spend whilst your postgraduate study. For example, information about postgraduate tuition fees and possible living expenses at Keele University is available at www.keele.ac.uk/pgt-tuition-fees.

UK Masters funding opportunities generally are very competitive. Some university academic schools and research institutes offer scholarships for Masters study. They vary from a one-off payment of a few hundred pounds to tuition fees at the home rate and/or maintenance payments. These funding sources are usually advertised on university postgraduate study websites, so you can check them regularly for updated funding information. Another funding source is from UK Research Councils (See below for more information about UK Research Council funding)⁴

¹ 'Masters in Research' <http://www.ljmu.ac.uk/RGSO/69746.htm> access date: 2010-12-16

² For more information about master's degree in gender, sexuality and the law, see course availability at <http://www.keele.ac.uk/law> (Keele Law department)

³ 'About Postgrad Taught Courses', *Prospect*, http://www.prospects.ac.uk/postgraduate_taught_courses.htm access date: 2010-12-16

⁴ There are seven Councils, all of which support particular fields of study – Arts and Humanities Research Council; Economic and Social Research Council; Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council; Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council; Medical Research Council; Natural Environment Research Council and Science and Technology Facilities Council. The two most relevant for PhD study in law, gender and sexuality are the AHRC [www.ahrc.ac.uk] and the ESRC [www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk].

Writing a good PhD proposal

So you're already doing, or have completed your Masters degree, or have decided to apply straight to the PhD route. How do you go about writing a good proposal? The goal of a PhD proposal is mainly to present your research ideas and the practical ways in which you think this research should be conducted. The specific requirements of PhD proposals are not fixed and vary between institutions so the following is an introduction, rather than a set of rules. Individual requirements can usually be found in university graduate school websites, though there are a few aspects that are common to most. Certainly, a good PhD proposal should at least have a clear research topic, meaningful research questions, and some engagement with methodology and research ethics.

Selecting a Topic

Topic selection is hugely important, because you are going to research it for the future several years and whether you are able to be awarded PhD is dependent on your substantial contribution towards this chosen topic. So you should bear the following issues in mind when choosing a PhD topic. Firstly, this topic should be what you are really interested in. Since what you are going to spend three or more years with your PhD project, your research life will be much more interesting if these hours are spent happily, thinking about something that truly interests you. Secondly, although you should select a topic you are interested in, you should be aware that the topic should also be realistic. A realistic topic means that it is a manageable project. If you are not sure about whether a topic is realistic enough, you may want to discuss it with experienced academics and ask for their opinions. Thirdly, you should think about whether your chosen topic will be helpful in promoting your future employment opportunities.

Research questions

After identifying your topic, it is the time to formulate relevant research question(s). A Research question is a statement that 'identifies the phenomenon to be studied'.⁵ Developing research question(s) is not only the essential part of a good PhD proposal, but also is crucial to your PhD project. When formulating your research question(s), you should consider the following two facts. Firstly, you should be able to manage to answer your research question(s) in three and four years. Secondly, your answer to the question(s) should have originality; in other words, it should be different from those already conducted in the chosen field. Well thought through, research questions, grounded in the relevant academic literature are the best way to give a good first impression to potential supervisors, and the people who assess your application. To formulate good research questions, you will need to be knowledgeable about the pre-existing literature relating to your chosen topic. Read widely and think carefully about what is not already known about your topic. You may also want to bear the following tips in mind. Firstly, answering these questions involves adequate technical knowledge, manageable scope, affordable time and money investment. Secondly, good research questions should be interesting to your potential supervisors and other

⁵ 'The Relationship Between the Research Question, Hypotheses, Specific Aims, and Long-Term Goals of the Project', <http://www.theresearchassistant.com/tutorial/2-1.asp> access date: 2010-12-19

academics in the chosen field. Thirdly, remember that answering these questions will present your substantial contribution to your chosen topic.⁶

Finding a supervisor.

Things to consider when selecting a supervisor

It is helpful to keep the following issues in mind when you plan to select your PhD supervisors. Firstly, they should have enough knowledge to supervise a PhD student in the field you are interested. You may be able to have a clear idea by having a look at their publications and biographical information which are usually available on university academic staff websites or using search engines, such as 'Google Scholar'. Secondly, they should have enough experience and patience to supervise and communicate with you. Thirdly, potential supervisors should be the academics with whom you have the matching interests. Finally, you may also want to think about whether potential supervisors have the ability to help you obtain suitable part time or full time jobs whilst your PhD study or after completion of your thesis.⁷

However, you should remember that it is your PhD, not your supervisors'. So, wherever possible you should take a proactive role in conducting your project, rather than being reliant on or controlled by your supervisors.⁸ A good supervisor/student relationship is subject to effective communication and negotiation. They will help you and your supervisors understand what you both are expecting from each other. For example, you can send you supervisors a chapter plan before starting to write or send them something you want them to comment on when you next meet. Even before starting your relationship with your supervisor, effective communication can help you know whether a potential supervisor is the person whom you really want to work with in the future 3 or 4 years.

How to use the PECANS 'find a supervisor' database

To help you find the right supervisor for your gender, sexuality and law doctoral research, PECANS have a database of experienced academics who would be interested in supervising doctoral research in the field. Using the PECANS 'find a supervisor' database is an effective and time-saving way to find potential supervisors. There are some useful tips on properly using it for supervisor seekers who may be not very familiar with it.

Step 1 To enter 'find a supervisor' database, as figures 1 and 2 show, click on 'find a supervisor' on the top right corner or the bottom of the PECANS home page. (PECANS website: <http://clgs-pecans.org.uk/>)

⁶ SR Cummings, WS Browner, SB Hulley, 1988, *Designing clinical research* (Lippincott Williams & Wilkins and Woters Kluwer: USA) chapter 2 'Conceiving the research question'

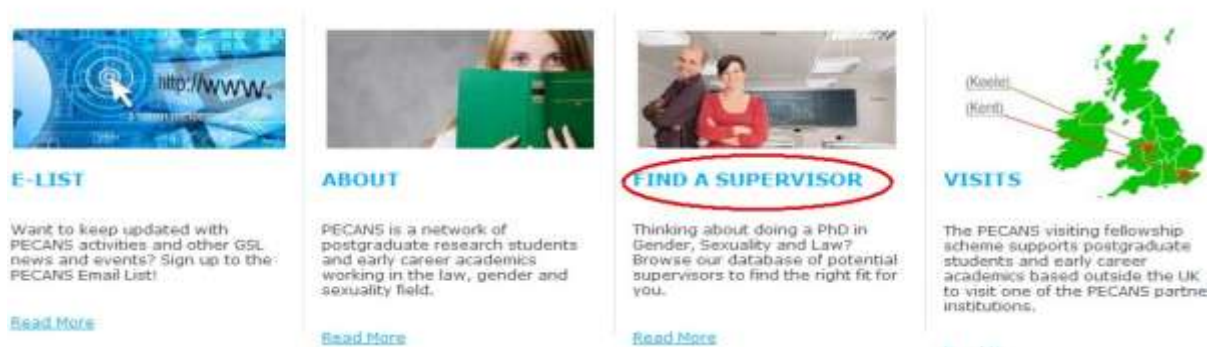
⁷ Subhajyoti Ray, 'Selecting a Doctoral Dissertation Supervisor: Analytical Hierarchy Approach to the Multiple Criteria Problem', *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 2007, vol.2, pp.24-32, p.25

⁸ An exception to this is in relation to specific PhD projects that are linked to specific research projects devised by the supervisor and advertised by institutions.

Figure 1

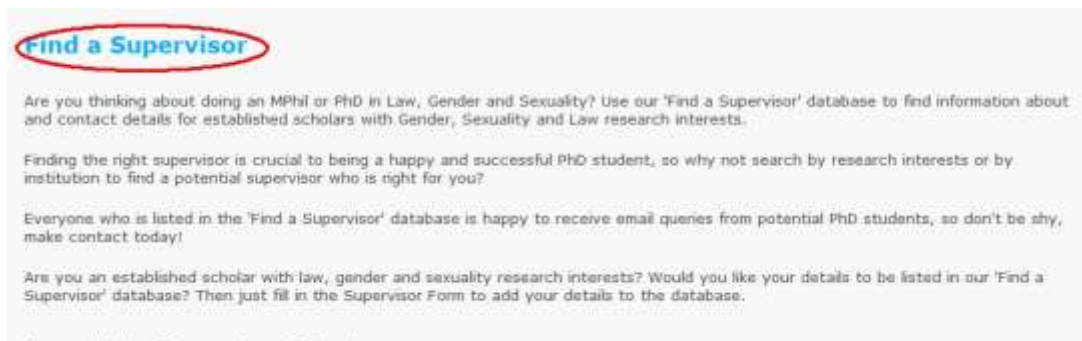


Figure 2



Step 2 As Figure 3 shows, once you enter the ‘find a supervisor’ page, you will find a brief introduction to it.

Figure 3



Now you have three options. If you have not decided whom you want to work with, but been clear about your PhD theme and which university you are happy to conduct your research in, you can choose the first one by inputting the keyword of your topic and the university. For example, if you are interested in researching women reproductive rights in Keele University, you may click on ‘search’ after inputting ‘reproduction’ and ‘Keele’. (See Photo 4)

Search the Supervisor Database:

Simple Search (keyword):

Search for: reproduction

Search

Figure 4

If you have the name of a potential supervisor or an institute in mind, you can find her information by using 'advanced search'. (See Figure 5)

Advanced Search:

Please fill in all fields or use the keyword search above.

Name:

Institution:

Search

Figure 5

Alternatively, you can check all supervisor records by choosing 'display all find a supervisor records' (See Figure 6)

Other Options:

- [Display All Find a Supervisor Records](#)
- [Add your details to the Supervisor Database](#)
- [Edit Your Supervisor Database Record](#)

Figure 6

The PECANS 'find a supervisor' database is not just for prospective students looking for a supervisor, but also for experienced academics who are interested in supervising PhD students. If you are an established scholar with law, gender and sexuality research interests, you are welcome to add your details to the 'Find a Supervisor' database. You can click on 'add your details to the supervisor database' to fill in a supervisor form and add your details to the database. Additionally, you can edit and update your personal information at anytime by clicking on 'edit your supervisor database record'. (See Photo 6)

How to contact a potential supervisor

After selecting potential supervisors and obtaining their contacts, you can send an email to make first contact with your potential PhD supervisors. As supervisors usually have a busy life, you should leave a few days for them to get back to you. In your first email, you should keep your text brief, clear and readable. If you have a draft of your research proposal or a clear idea of the area you want to research, it is a good idea to attach this to your email.

Funding your PhD research

Research Council Studentship Competitions

One type of studentships that home and EU students are eligible to apply is Research Council Studentship Competitions. You may apply it via submitting your application to relevant universities where Research Council Studentship is available. Normally, Studentship Competition offers two year awards for Research Masters and up to three years for doctoral degrees or one year for research Masters and three years for PhD study (1+3 scheme). Research Council studentships also include a relatively generous amount each year for research support, which can be used to support attendance at conferences, or to pay direct expenses associated with empirical research. Information about Research Council Studentship Competitions is often advertised on individual university websites or relevant academic research websites, such as 'Findaphd' (www.findaphd.com/student/funding/funding-1.asp). Alternatively, you can visit the UK Research Council funding website (www.rcuk.ac.uk/research/Pages/home.aspx).⁹ Research Council funding is not available in all subject areas or in all institutions, so do research this carefully. It is also highly competitive, and only the very best research proposals will be selected by institutions to put forward for research council studentships. Remember as well that the deadlines for these studentships are often very early in the year, because a lot of work has to go into the application, both from the prospective student and the prospective supervisors.

Institutional funding (Graduate Teaching Assistants and Studentships)

Many universities also offer their own funding for PhD students, such as Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) posts. Successful applicants will undertake a specified number of hours teaching and/or administrative duties, in addition to working on their research programme. These scholarships are usually worth the same amount as research council students and are usually open to UK/EU students and in some cases also to international students. Many institutions who offer studentships also provide a small amount of research support funds. Institutional studentship information is usually advertised on university internal research funding website, and many advertise through jobs.ac.uk, the Times Higher Education Magazine or the Guardian Newspaper. So if you plan to study at a certain university, you should keep an eye open for its updated funding opportunities, and sign up to the email alerts from the academic jobs websites. In addition to institutional studentships, some universities will also offer fee waivers or other partial support. As with the research council studentship competitions, institutional funding is very competitive, and there will often be many more applicants than studentships available. To stand the best chance, you need to have a strong research proposal.

Self-funding

As funding opportunities are extremely competitive, many PhD students consider self-funding their studies. Often this is easier to do on a part-time basis so that you can work and study at the same time. There may also be part time work available at your institution, for example sessional teaching or other part-time jobs, like invigilation or being a resident tutor in university accommodation.

⁹ For more funding information, see <http://www.findaphd.com/student/funding/funding-1.asp> access date: 2010-11-26

Further considerations for International Students

If you are an international student, particularly when English is not your first language, you should think about your plan to do a PhD in the UK carefully. Doing a PhD in the UK means that you will study and live in a pure English environment, so your English skills will be improved significantly. However, the dark side is that in many cases, you will find difficulty in writing a thesis or any academic paper in English. While most successful candidates have met the university's language entry requirement (normally IELTS 6.5 or 7.0 in some disciplines), the language requirement for writing a PhD thesis, particularly in social science disciplines, is extremely demanding and much higher than the IELTS 7.0 level. Secondly, British research in many disciplines has a leading place in the world. Doing a PhD in the UK means that you will have a great chance to contact world-class academics and research. Nevertheless, you should also remember that even for home students, passing a PhD viva is not an easy job. It will be especially difficult when you have to think and study in a way in which you probably have not used in your past education experience. Furthermore, studying and living in a foreign country means that you have to conquer homesickness, communication barriers and huge study pressure. Lastly, obtaining a PhD in English may raise possibility of being successful in some competitive arrears in your home country. However, doing a PhD in the U.K is costly for overseas students (see 3c for more details about UK tuition fees for international students), so you may have to ensure that you have enough financial support before making your decision.