

THE UK
PHD
APPLICATION
GUIDE
2021/22

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Introduction

There is a barrier between undergraduates and postgraduates in academia. Some undergrads might get a peek at the other side during a summer placement or final year project, but the partition remains, and it is quite easy for someone to get to the end of their degree and have no idea what a PhD student does or how to become one. This barrier of information becomes a particular problem for those of us who want to step to the other side and undertake a PhD of our own. At most, you might have gotten advice from an undergraduate tutor, or a pamphlet from a careers fair, maybe a presentation given by your university. However, there appears to be no online resource which compiles all the information a PhD applicant would find invaluable. None of this information is secret, it is just poorly communicated. This is information that almost everyone finds out - after they've begun their PhD. This information only needs to be better communicated to applicants on the outside. The philosophy behind this guide is that acquiring a PhD is difficult, but much of that difficulty is avoidable. An entire layer of arbitrary difficulty could – and should - be removed by making the information regarding how PhDs and PhD applications work freely available to applicants.

You might be wondering why you should listen to me (I certainly wonder that sometimes). At time of writing, I am a first year PhD student. I have stepped behind the curtain and know much I wish I'd known during my own PhD applications. Having freshly experienced the entire application process firsthand, now combined with access to academics, interviews and members of funding panels, allows me a great deal of insight into what PhD applicants *really* need to do to be successful. It was less than a year ago that I was undergoing my own applications. I remember the stress; I remember the confusion, and I now know how much I didn't know about applying for a PhD.

This guide has been written in a way that it can be read beginning to end as a cohesive step-by-step journey through PhD application. However, each section is also designed to be independent and by no means should you feel obliged to read the whole thing or read the sections in order. You may be part way through your application process and have no need

for certain sections or you may spot certain sections that stand out as more important to you, by all means jump ahead to them. You may even find it useful to return to this guide at different points along your journey, such as when you've been offered an interview and need to know what you're in for.

The information here relates to PhD application in the UK. PhD applications in other countries are often similar, but not identical. While this document is intended to succinctly provide all the information you might need for a UK PhD application if you are applying to other countries, additional investigation into their own application processes will be needed, though much of the advice here will still apply.

Useful Terms and Abbreviations

DTP - **Doctoral Training Partnership:** A collection of universities and/or institutes that pool their resources for training PhD students.

PhD - **Doctor of Philosophy**

PI - **Principal Investigator:** The Doctor or Professor who is your main supervisor, the person who will usually have the biggest impact when planning your PhD and seeking advice.

Postdoc - **Postdoctoral Researcher**

UKRI - **United Kingdom Research and Innovation:** The government body that directs state funded research. The funding for many PhDs comes from this source and they make decisions on (among other things) the standard yearly wage for a PhD student and deadline extensions.

What is a PhD?

Probably the simplest answer to this question: A PhD is a research degree. The ultimate aim is to contribute some sort of original research to your field of study. Most PhDs take 3 to 4 years of full-time work to complete (studying part-time typically taking twice as long). However, this short question can be given a far more complex and nuanced answer; on paper, a PhD may be described as above, but if we dig deeper and ask, “What *really* is a PhD?” (which also implies the questions, “What is a PhD like” and “Should I do one?”) there is a lot more to say than “A PhD is a research degree”.

Applying for a PhD is a long and arduous journey. Competition for entry is only increasing whilst the number of available places stays largely the same. Many people take several years before having a successful application. And that’s just the prologue, once you start on your PhD, things don’t exactly ease off. I’m not telling you this to scare you away, it may be hard, but it is also worth it (at least, in my opinion). The reason I am telling you this, is so you know what you are getting yourself in for. A PhD is hard *for everyone*, there is no way a PhD won’t be hard for you. You must be sure that your reason for doing it is concrete and valid enough to see you through several years of difficulty. The best way I can sum up this issue is with the question: *Do you want to do a PhD, or do you want to have a PhD?* It doesn’t matter how much you want to have a PhD (there are plenty of benefits to having one) because 3-4 years is a very long time to be doing something you don’t enjoy, regardless of the future payoff. No one can ever be 100% sure what their PhD will be like, but the information in this section aims to give you a pretty good idea. Using this, I ask you to take the time to think honestly about the sort of person you are and if you’d enjoy doing this kind of thing. Self-Reflection about such an important decision like this is difficult, but a good indication would be if you would do a PhD even if you didn’t get a qualification at the end. If a PhD you’re considering were just a job, with the same work, the same hours, the same wage, etc. *without* a prestigious and valuable award at the end, would you be tempted to apply for it anyway?

What does a PhD student do on a day-to-day basis?

Herein lies the problem with understanding if you'd enjoy doing a PhD. There is no single answer to this question. Partly because every PhD is completely unique and partly because the nature of a PhD means you are doing completely new things on a regular basis, in many ways there is no such thing as a normal day for a PhD student, so it's impossible to say what a PhD student does on a normal day. However, to at least attempt to answer this question, the work you do will be usually be based on problem solving and critical thinking.

Generally, research involves planning how to collect data, collecting data and analysing data. This data (and therefore how it is collected and analysed) is obviously incredibly PhD dependent; it could be patterns of light from a distant solar system, or feedback from a stroke recovery support group, it could involve interpreting the performance of a machine learning algorithm, or counting the number of leaves on a plant. Whatever form the data is in, your day-to-day tasks will be focused on collecting it and interpreting it. The problem solving comes in planning how to collect this data, in a sensible and unbiased way. The critical thinking comes in analysing your data, determining if the results are significant and what conclusions can or can't be drawn from them.

What qualifications are required?

The exact criteria for a PhD varies depending on the subject and institution but will be stated somewhere in the PhD listing. As a minimum, applicants are expected to have at least a 2:1 in a related degree. However, more competitive PhDs will commonly ask for an 'upper 2:1' (65% or more final grade), a 1st class degree, or even a master's degree.

Although not essential, successful applicants typically have some sort of experience in research before, whether as part of a summer placement scheme, assisting a researcher during their undergraduate degree, taking on an extended research project as part of their final year undergraduate or master's course, or from a related job, such as a lab technician, after their degree.

What do you have to accomplish for a PhD?

A PhD is not examined like a normal degree. There is no final grade, you simply pass or fail. Whilst you may find yourself performing a handful of written assignments throughout your PhD, depending on your institution and supervisor, the outcome of your PhD is mostly decided by an oral examination called a *viva voce*. Almost always just referred to as your 'viva', several academics will read your final dissertation (or thesis) on the work you have conducted over your PhD and then interrogate you on it; the process is intentionally challenging and can last several hours. Despite the daunting nature of this task, it is actually very rare for someone to fail a viva (one of the benefits of such a rigorous modern selection process). Most people find that the difficulty in their PhD comes long before this final hurdle, the day-to-day work of a PhD can often be very difficult because, by definition, the work you're doing is novel. This novelty means there's few places to turn when things go wrong, if something isn't working, or some data doesn't make sense it's up to you to sort it out, and many of the problems you face won't have a known answer – part of your PhD is finding out some of those answers, and it is likely that by the end of your PhD there will be an academic niche which few people in the world will know more about than you. Aside from this difficulty in real world problem solving, PhD students commonly find difficulty in the familiar student issues such as balancing work and rest, burnout, and imposter syndrome.

Funding

Throughout this guide I regularly use terms like “Getting a PhD” or “Successful PhD application”. For most applicants this is actually synonymous with “Getting a *funded* PhD” or “Successful PhD *funding* application”. There are many routes to getting a fully funded PhD, here the main ways are categorised and explained. Regardless of how and where you get your funding, the money is intended to cover three principal expenses of a PhD: Tuition fees, your wage and your expenses. Funding amounts can vary by total amount and how the funder divides your money into these categories. For example, two projects might pay the same wage, and fully cover tuition fees, but differ by several £1000s in expenses funding - which can make a big difference if your project requires expensive equipment or if you want to present your work at international conferences.

When categorising PhDs by funding status, they can broadly be placed into five groups:

1. Already Funded PhDs

PhD projects or supervisors which have funding already attached to them. You are applying to be selected by the supervisor(s) as their PhD student.

2. Potentially funded PhDs

Not the same as unfunded projects. These are PhD projects which are part of a funding scheme or DTP with a limited number of funding places to allocate. You will first need to be selected by the project supervisor as their chosen candidate, then you will have to complete against the candidates selected for the other projects in the scheme for one of the funding places.

3. Funding without an attached PhD

It is possible (though rare) to acquire PhD funding for yourself, rather than for a particular project (e.g. through a charity, your nation’s government or a scholarship). You will then need to find a supervisor and plan a project with them, though you will still need to pass the university’s basic entry requirements to begin studying.

4. PhD without attached funding yet

Plenty of PhD projects can be found that do not have funding attached to them, or in rare cases a student and supervisor could plan a new project together. It is possible, with a good supervisor, to then find a funding source for the project (e.g. from the University or an industry partner) but it is nowhere near as certain as projects that have already been given funding or are in a funding scheme.

5. Self-funded PhD

In the humanities, it has been common for a long time for students to undertake a PhD at a University half-time and use the other 50% of their time to earn money by teaching in the same department. This is much less common in science departments, where teaching is largely the preserve of academic staff. There's nothing stopping a science PhD student from undertaking a part-time PhD, whilst working part-time elsewhere to fund the position, although this is much rarer. However, recent changes to student loans means that it is also now possible for science students to self-fund a full-time PhD.

If you are searching for PhDs via Findaphd.com (discussed in 'Finding a PhD' on page 13) use the search customisation tool to ensure that you are only being shown appropriately funded PhD projects.

PhD listings will outline the source of the funding (usually at the bottom of the page), take note of this, because the source of your funding can affect what is expected of your PhD and what you are allowed to do. The main types of PhD are:

1. Individually funded PhD

PhD projects not attached to a particular scheme. You won't have access to all the training opportunities of someone in a larger scheme, or – depending on how you look at it – you won't have to jump through as many hoops. However, you may be more restricted by the scope of your PhD. For instance, if the funding comes from an industrial funder, they may

be hiring you to research a very specific subject, focusing on very specific results, leaving you with less freedom over the direction over your own research than other PhD students.

2. Doctoral Training Partnership

Most PhDs are funded as part of a Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP). DTPs involve multiple universities or institutions pooling their money and resources. You will be treated as part of your DTP's 'cohort', giving you a network of students potentially studying in different fields and at different universities. DTPs will often provide you with training courses and opportunities to boost your skills and typically encourage interaction between the involved institutions, via DTP wide conferences and residential trips.

3. Rotation PhD

Rotation PhDs are less common in the UK (especially for arts and humanities). They allow you the most freedom of any option, by letting you undertake several mini projects (typically 2-3 months each) for the first portion of your PhD, before settling on a larger 'main' project to work on for the final couple of years. This can allow you the exploration of a wider range of topics (if you are still undecided about specifically what you want to research) and give you a valuable background understanding of related fields to what you end up studying. This improved background knowledge, of course, comes at the expense of time to work on your main project.

Advice for International Students

If you are applying as an international student, it is possible that funded PhD opportunities are still open to you (depending on your country of origin and who's funding the PhD). However, most funding schemes severely limit the number of non-UK candidates they take on each year or disallow them entirely. Many international students instead find more success by pursuing funding separately from a PhD project, either by getting in contact with a supervisor then working with them to find a funding source, or by acquiring funding in their home country then using it to fund a UK based PhD. There isn't space in this guide to discuss every country's PhD funding sources; I mention it here only to make international applicants aware that funding from your home country can sometimes be used to fund a UK-based PhD. The remaining advice in this guide, such as how to find and apply for PhDs, is universal.

Finding a PhD

Here we are, the first proper step in getting a PhD. Knowing what's available is a surprisingly simple task, providing you know where to look.

1. Findaphd.com

By far the most useful way to see what PhDs are currently on offer. This website is a comprehensive collection of postgraduate degrees in all fields, at all institutions, of all funding types. You can use the search customisation tool to narrow down your search and see what's on offer. New PhDs are regularly added and deadlines are always arriving, so check back regularly (especially around the periods listed in the 'Important Dates' section on page 30).

2. Directly contacting a supervisor

Much more precise than the scattergun approach of findaphd.com, but therefore less likely to hit. If there is a particular academic who you really want to work with it can be worth your time to email them about PhD opportunities. They may have ways of finding funding for an individual student they are impressed by, or they may be in the process of putting together a PhD proposal as part of a funding scheme, which they may suggest you apply for; they may even help with your application.

3. Academic network

If there are academics you've got to know over your undergraduate degree, or through your work (personal tutors, project supervisors, literature review supervisors, summer placement supervisors, etc.) let them know that you are applying for PhDs. Part of being an academic is having a big network of colleagues and they often talk to each other about PhDs they're thinking of advertising, which is information they'll happily pass onto any interested student who has expressed an interest in that field.

4. PhD fairs

These can be useful for certain people, who want to ask questions about specific institutions or schemes, however, it should be noted that these fairs do not have any information you can't easily find online. Virtual fairs are currently being run in place of real ones and they can be useful if you have specific questions, but aren't necessary, and are more useful for people looking into taught postgraduate courses.

5. Twitter

Twitter is the academic's social media platform of choice. Whilst there won't be any PhD opportunities listed solely on twitter, many supervisors will advertise new projects (or even planned projects) on their twitter feed. If you don't already have a twitter account, don't worry, you aren't missing out. However, if you do have one, it might be worth following any academics in the area you want to research, for notifications on their latest PhD listings, or re-tweeted ones from their colleagues in a similar field.

It is likely, that through these routes you will find many PhDs you *could* apply for, but before moving onto the section about 'Getting a PhD' it is worth asking which ones you *should* apply for. Applying for multiple projects is a good idea for almost everyone; the application process is competitive and when one position has many objectively good applicants, many incredible students miss out on a PhD for tiny or subjective reasons. Even an objectively outstanding student should consider hedging their bets by applying for multiple PhDs. This isn't to imply you should apply for every single PhD you come across; PhD applications take a lot of time, so do visits to prospective universities and so do interview days, and if you're applying straight from university these will also coincide with the busyness that accompanies important final year deadlines. Additionally, not every PhD in your area of interest will be right for you: the project, the supervisor, the institution, the location, the funding; all of these can be a factor in your decision, there is no point applying for a PhD for the sole reason of increasing your chance of getting *any* PhD. Each application takes a lot, so don't waste your time on one that you wouldn't be over the moon to get.

Getting a PhD

Once you've identified one, or several potential PhD projects, all you've got to do is go and get them! Ok, it's not quite that simple, but there's a few standard steps in the application process that can help simplify your PhD journey massively. I've broken down the advice on PhD application into three main sections, which are universal to *all* PhD applications.

I. First Contact

Before spending hours of your precious time editing your CV, writing application essays, preparing for interview questions and re-typing your CV into separate boxes on the application form for some reason, I highly recommend that you contact the main supervisor of the PhD you're applying for.

Firstly, this can save you wasting time on a fruitless application. Different PhDs will have different entry requirements, but most PhDs (regardless of subject or institution) will advertise themselves as requiring at least a 2:1 or above in a degree related to the PhD, however the supervisor may decide (due to personal preference, or awareness of a DTP's competitiveness) to only take on students with a 1st class degree or a masters. And from your end, a short exchange with a supervisor may raise a red flag for you about a person you wouldn't want to work for, or a project that isn't quite what you thought it would be.

Along a much more positive vein, if a supervisor likes the look of you, they may invite you to visit them to discuss the project and to show you around the place you'd be working (or more likely this year, they'll organise a video call). Not all supervisors will choose to do this, so it isn't an inherently bad sign if this doesn't happen, however it is an inherently good one if they do; academics are busy people, they wouldn't waste their time entertaining someone they didn't see as a viable PhD student. These talks are for your benefit as well. They can help you get a better feel for the person who you'd be working closely with for at least three years and allow you to express your own thoughts and ideas on the project.

The initial email should be brief but informative, it should make clear your interest but not be sycophantic. Glimpsing an academic's inbox would send most people into a panic attack:

they have a never-ending stream of things demanding their attention and they don't have time to read your life story. Make it immediately clear who you are and why you're applying for their PhD in as few words as possible. The email itself should be no more than a few sentences long, with your CV attached to further detail your academic competence and suitability for the role. If you do squeeze into this short email any additional information, make it about your value, not theirs. At this stage of the application, you are trying to convince them of what you could do for them, not what they could do for you; this isn't the time to tell them what you want to do with the project or why you want to do a PhD, instead you should be convincing them to consider you as a PhD student.

If you receive a positive response to this email, you've got the green light to go ahead and start your written application, though bear in mind that this isn't a guarantee of success either, the supervisor likely has several promising applicants who have contacted them. If they invite you to a meeting, or let you know that you can email them with any questions that is the time to probe further into their thoughts on the project and explain your own.

II. The Application

What is required by an official PhD application will vary by institution and subject, so the advice in this section will be kept general. I have broken up the types of information often required of PhD applications into two groups: Generic Information (that are identical for every application) and Specific Information (which you will have to tailor to each application).

Generic Information

1. Degree
2. Academic Transcript
3. Evidence of English Proficiency

These pieces of information will be required by every application but are not application specific. Therefore, you can save yourself time early on, by having these prepared and easily accessible, to then be attached to the rest of your application when needed.

For evidence of your degree, just scan a copy of your degree certificate (though if your application is successful, you might have to bring your actual degree to the institute you've applied to). If you are still in your final year of university, then don't worry about this step - providing you followed the guidance in 'First Contact' and ensured that the PhD you're applying for accept people who are yet to graduate.

In addition to (or in place of) your degree, you will also likely be asked to provide an academic transcript. This is an official readout of the grade you received on every module throughout your undergraduate degree. Depending on the application the transcript may need to be a PDF, or a physical document posted to your chosen institute. Your undergraduate university will provide a service where they provide this document for you in either form, though they'll normally charge a few quid for doing so.

The English proficiency evidence is not required of home students. It is only asked of applicants whose first language is not English. If that's you, you likely already know more about this process than I do and if you did an undergraduate degree in an English-speaking country, you'll already have this sort of evidence to hand.

Specific Information

1. C.V.
2. 1 or 2 pieces of written work

These two items are also universally asked by PhD applications. The reason I've intentionally separated them from the 'General Information' is that these will require far more time and focus, as they demand active creation on your part and will need to be unique to every PhD you apply for.

You may already have a C.V. ready to go (especially if you've followed the advice in the previous section and are in the process of sending it to prospective supervisors), or you

may have one lying about that just need updating. I won't go into the specific details on how to write a C.V. here, but if this is something you struggle with most universities provide some sort of C.V. writing help service and there's plenty of people online giving advice. The main piece of advice I have, you have likely already noticed – your C.V. is an application-specific piece of information. Although parts of your C.V. will remain static, there is still a great deal of flexibility in how you convey your current qualifications and experiences. Each PhD you apply for will likely have a slightly different focus, I therefore recommend that once you've got a generic, all-purpose C.V. that you're happy with, you should edit this to specifically highlight your suitability for each specific PhD. As an undergraduate your course title may not have gotten much more specific than 'Psychology' or 'English', whereas PhDs are focused on one incredibly specific field of interest. Consider what an individual PhD is focused on, and how you can spin your current experiences and qualifications to that specific field. Highlight specific things you've done that relate more to that field, give examples of modules you took that relate to it (if these were optional modules, highlight the fact that you chose to study this area), and use examples from third year or master's degree you might have done. For example, my degree was in Biochemistry and Genetics, for some applications I had to highlight the 'Biochemistry', in others 'Genetics' got the emphasis. I had a personal interest in plants, though this was a topic that was not heavily featured during my undergraduate degree or masters, so for my plant focused PhD applications I gave over way more of my C.V. to detailing two plant-based summer placements I had done.

As for the written work, this is the piece of information that can vary the most between applications. Each application will make clear what piece or pieces of written work they require of you, but commonly they will be along the lines of a "Personal Statement" or a "Research Proposal", requiring you to outline your personal suitability for a PhD or your ideas for what to do with the PhD if you were offered it. Although these pieces of work can differ between applications, they often have overlapping expectations, so the writing of each one will get easier with practice, as you get a feel for the sort of thing they want and some good taglines and buzzwords that can be scattered through all your applications. Once you've written your first one it's worth sending it to a trusted supervisor or

undergraduate tutor to read over, they may not be working in a field related to yours, but they will likely have read this sort of thing many times before and have a good feel for what supervisors and funders are looking for in an application.

References

In addition to collecting or creating all the above pieces of information, you will need to sort out some references for your application. Most PhD applications will specifically ask for two academic references, either attached by you to your application, or separately sent to them by your referee. As mentioned at several other points in this guide, academics are very busy people; mostly they will be happy to provide you with a reference when asked, but make sure you do this as early as possible. They may not have time for several weeks when you first ask them which could put you in a tight spot for getting the application sent off in time, and they certainly won't appreciate being pushed for a reference to be turned around quickly, due to your own poor planning. Be especially mindful of time if you're asking a referee to provide a reference for multiple PhDs, as they may need some extra time to fulfil the specific requirements of each institute. Do note however that some institutions allow you to send off your application first but will allow your referees to email them your reference after the deadline.

III. The Interview

If your written application is successful, congratulations! You've already made it further than most and stood out amongst a field of incredibly competitive applicants. The next step is the interview (or in some cases, interviews). I'll start by explaining the two types of interview you could be facing (and why they're fundamentally different), followed by a list of questions to expect from any interview.

Supervisor Interview

The first interview you might have will be with your potential supervisor. This may be the only interview you have (if they already have funding for you), the first of several (if they're selecting you as their candidate for a DTP), or one you skip entirely (if, based on the interactions you've already had, they select you as their student). This may be an interview with a single main supervisor, but it is much more likely that you will have multiple interviewers, often the project co-supervisors also being present, or sometimes just having another academic they know present, as someone to give a second opinion on the applicants and help them decide on a student.

The questions asked in this interview will be more focused on the details of the project, what you hope to get from it and what you think you could bring to the table. They will still likely ask many of the 'common questions' listed further on in this section, but they will then follow up with specific questions testing your knowledge of the field. These people are experts in the area you study (or hope to be studying) so they are capable of asking more in-depth questions; they may want to hear about a particular part of the project that appeals to you, or - after asking about your master's project - they may ask you to justify why you conducted a piece of research in a particular way. It is uncommon for the questions to become as exacting as an exam, but if you are presented with a difficult technical question that you don't know how to answer, don't pretend to know. Firstly, because the person asking the question is an expert and you are unlikely to fool them and secondly, because it's not as big a deal as you might think. A PhD is about learning, one of the biggest skills a doctorate signifies is that its holder is comfortable regularly teaching themselves strange and difficult new things; no one is meant to go into a PhD already knowing everything they need to know. If you don't know the answer to a question, make a clear effort to think about what's been asked then make it clear you aren't sure. Still make an attempt to answer (though clearly indicating this isn't a wild guess, but something you've taken time to consider) as this shows that you're capable of calmly and rationally thinking through a new problem and can turn a wrong answer into an exhibition of your suitability to do a PhD.

Funding Interview

Many PhDs, such as those funded by a DTP, a charity or a scholarship, will require you to go through an interview with the funding body. This typically comes after you've already been interviewed and been selected by your supervisor.

The type of questions you'll be asked will depend on who it is interviewing you, though will typically be less specific than a supervisor interview. Think carefully about who the funder is and what they are likely to focus on. DTPs and scholarships tend to be for general fields and the interviewers will reflect this. For example, I was applying for PhDs in plant genetics, and I had interviews with a 'Biotechnology' funder an 'Environmental Science' funder and a 'Plant Science' funder. The questions asked by each were quite different, each focusing on their own field. The interviewers will typically be academics working within that funding scheme and so their work may be quite different to yours. No one in my biotechnology funding interviews knew much about plants, whereas the people in my environmental science funding interview didn't ask many questions about molecular biology.

In addition to the interview, it is possible that this stage will ask for some additional display of skill, such as giving a presentation or being asked to solve a problem in a short time limit. These additional steps are becoming less common nowadays but be aware that they do exist and make sure you know exactly what will be expected of you before the interview (an experienced supervisor will be very helpful for this).

Common interview questions

Almost every one of the following questions is asked at pretty much every PhD interview, regardless of subject or institution, whether you're being interviewed by a potential supervisor or a funding panel. There will of course be additional questions, more specific to your own field, but the ones listed here are very common and I can guarantee you will be asked most-to-all of them in any PhD interview.

Tell us about your academic background

Almost always the first question you'll be asked, as a way for you to introduce yourself. Don't go into excessive detail; this question is more intended as an ice breaker than looking for anything specific but it's also one of the questions most likely to find you rambling on for half the interview time (see additional tip 3 below).

Why do you want to do a PhD? / Why do you want to do this PhD? / Why do you want to do a PhD with this supervisor? / Why do you want to do a PhD at this university/institute?

You're guaranteed to get at least one of these "Why do you want to...?" questions, and don't be surprised if you're asked them all. The prevalence of these questions and their personal nature, makes it particularly useful to take some time before the interview to think about them. The answers may of course overlap, for instance "I want to do this PhD because The University of X is the leading institute in the country for studying Y". Whatever your answers make sure they're personal to you they really want to know why *you* want to do a PhD, not just any reason why someone might want to do a PhD. E.g.: "I've always wanted to be a scientist since I was a kid" sounds like the sort of thing an applicant thinks an interviewer might want to hear and it doesn't relate to the specificities of a PhD – it's generic and obvious; "In the second year of my undergrad degree we had a series of lectures on genome sequencing, I went and read some papers and learnt about the 1000 genomes project..." comes off as more specific and therefore more genuine and leads into plenty of other questions.

How will you cope?

This question won't be asked this bluntly, but will instead be in the form of a question like "Tell us about a time you struggled" or "A simple experiment you are working on stops working, seemingly for no reason, and you don't know why, what do you do?" Difficulty is

an intrinsic part of any PhD, so be on the lookout for the guaranteed question that equates to “What will you do when the going inevitably gets tough?” Make it clear you comprehend the difficulty a PhD entails and indicate your confidence in your ability to cope, maybe with an example from the past, but leave it at that; this is an answer that you can overdo. If you go on and on about the horrendous slog of a PhD then the interviewers will begin to wonder why you want to do one in the first place: You’re trying to convince the interviewers that you’re hardworking in the face of adversity, not a masochist.

What qualities should a PhD student have?

Similar to the advice for the previous question; do not drone on about resilience or determination, because these qualities are needed to get through the horrific slog that a PhD is. A PhD is difficult, so show a deeper, more nuanced understanding where this difficulty comes from. Talking about skills like problem-solving, critical thinking and imagination, shows you’re more interested in solving your inevitable issues than just brute-forcing your way through them.

What are your career plans following your PhD?

Many people applying for a PhD will have a clear and specific goal afterwards. However, it’s perfectly acceptable to not have a definite answer to this. Interviewers aren’t expecting you to map out the next 50 years of your life, culminating in a Nobel prize. They just want to know that you have put some thought into a PhD as a professional qualification, rather than just something to keep you busy for a few years.

Tell us about a paper you read recently

This seemingly innocuous question turns out to be a shockingly effective determinant of PhD interview success. If you’re interested enough to do a PhD in a subject, then you should be interested enough to have read a vaguely related paper recently. Unless they state

otherwise, any paper will do, just to show that you have an authentic interest in learning, though it is possible you will be asked about a paper related to the PhD or - rarely - one that has been published by your supervisor. You don't need details, just a quick outline of the paper and why you found it interesting.

Additional tips

Finally, I end this section with a collection of useful tips that apply to all interviews but haven't neatly fit into any other place in this section of the guide.

1. Know your own application

Before the interview begins, the interviewer(s) will have read over your written application. You won't have lied or plagiarised anything, but it is possible that you wrote parts of it several months before the interview, and since then you've potentially written many other applications and proposals for different projects. You don't want to be in a position where your interviewer – having freshly read your application – is more familiar with it than you are. Avoid getting muddled up by reviewing your application and CV before the interview, under pressure it can be easy to forget simple stuff you reckon you remember. Don't leave it up to chance and have the information about the project fresh in your mind.

2. But don't be rehearsed

It is useful to be familiar with your application and the project in general, but you can also overdo it. If you try to rote learn answers that you think sound good, you will just come off as disingenuous. Even if your answers are truthful, the interviewer will think you are just trying to say whatever they want to hear to get the PhD. Especially don't go memorising sections written in your application (no matter how well written it is). If an interviewer has just familiarised themselves with the application, they likely have just read the phrases you are now reeling off, which at best will be interpreted as a little wooden, at worst it will be seen as evidence that you can't think and communicate spontaneously.

3. You're on the clock

You won't be the only person being interviewed that day. To get through everyone, each candidate is allotted a fixed amount of time (usually 30 minutes) for their interview. Once the time runs out, that's it, the questions end. Much like a written exam, if you spend too long answering any one question you run the risk of having less time to answer the other ones. When you're asked to outline your academic history at the start of the interview, don't ramble on for 20 minutes, you're only shooting yourself in the foot when you lose the opportunity to properly explain why you want to do a PhD, or convince the interviewer of your ability to solve difficult problems.

4. Seek out help

If you're currently studying at a university, they will almost certainly have some sort of additional support available for PhD applications. It doesn't matter if you're applying to a different institution, your university greatly benefits from you getting that PhD; it counts towards their graduate employment figures which are one of the most important metrics used in university rankings. Have a look on your current institution's website or ask your academic tutor, many universities now have interview practice services, where you can book a mock interview with a member of staff who will then give you feedback on how you come across.

5. Make sure you are available for the interview

Most PhD listings will include a mention of when the interview(s) will be held. The most common dates for the different types of interview are listed under 'Important Dates' on page 30, so even if you aren't aware of the specific date for your interview, you'll know roughly when the interview will be held long in advance, so maybe hold off on that February holiday.

Post-application

Your applications are all written, and everything is sent off. Now all that's left is waiting. This section holds a few pieces of information and advice on how the selection process works and what to do after you've completed the application process.

When will I hear back?

There's no fixed time when you might hear back about a written application (other than it being before any stated interview date), but the process often takes months, so when you haven't heard anything a fortnight after the deadline, don't go panicking. If, however, you've attended an interview the supervisor or institute will usually let you know when they plan to have made their final decisions, and this will usually be within a week or two.

What is a 'Reserve list'?

If you have applied for a PhD with a large number of candidates (such as a DTP) you may initially be neither accepted nor rejected but placed on a reserve list. This is a list of exceptional candidates who would make good PhD students but weren't one of the best x who applied that year (x being the finite number of funding places available). This means that if people who are offered the PhD turn down the offer, the institute will work down the reserve list of candidates, offering the place to them, in order. You may be wondering to yourself why anyone would turn down such an offer, but it's a surprisingly common occurrence. People apply for many schemes and then receive multiple offers, or some sort of life event may cause them to hold off on the enormous commitment of a PhD. I was once offered a PhD for which I was initially 5th reserve, so whilst being high up on the reserve list doesn't guarantee anything, it still gives you a surprisingly decent chance of eventually being offered the PhD and is certainly not the same as a rejection.

Rejection

If your application(s) this year have been unsuccessful I'm sure you're disappointed – but there is a silver lining. It is becoming rarer and rarer for people to be successful the first year they apply for PhDs and there's a whole plethora of things you can do to move forward.

1. Ask for feedback

Whatever stage you were rejected at, it's worth asking on feedback on how you did and why you were unsuccessful. You might not get much back from a DTP or scholarship, that interviewed many people, but it's still worth a shot. The feedback is likely to be even more in-depth from a failed supervisor interview. The insight they can give can be very useful for crafting any future PhD applications and you have nothing to lose (at worst they just don't respond). You may even be met with the genuine reply that there wasn't anything particularly wrong with your application, you just weren't quite as qualified as someone else who applied that year. Regardless of the situation, hearing authentic advice from someone who critically assessed your C.V., written work or interview is a rare and valuable opportunity.

2. Try again next year

Sometimes you're just unlucky or need some more time to be ready for a PhD; a rejection from this year's PhD doesn't have to be "No", only "Not now". The application experience in itself will make you far more prepared and therefore a better applicant next year, but there's also a range of ways you can strengthen your application, given the time of an entire year, the most significant of which are:

i. Finish your degree

If you have been applying whilst in the final year of your undergraduate degree, I have some good news: by next year your application will be significantly stronger, even if you do nothing in the meantime. It may seem ridiculous, given that your PhD interview is likely only taking place a few months before your dissertation deadline, but applying with a

potential degree is seen as significantly less valuable than applying with a guaranteed degree and grade.

ii. Get a master's degree

As PhD applications become more and more competitive it is becoming increasingly common for them to require a master's degree. Often, PhDs or funding schemes don't even list this as part of their criteria, but when they come to separating out that year's applicants and they're faced with dozens, maybe hundreds, of good candidates, "Do they have a master's" is an easy and objective criteria they can use to instantly cull a chunk of the applications. A master's degree exhibits your dedication to further learning and often will involve practical experience in a given area ('research-led' masters are typically valued higher than 'taught' masters) giving a potential supervisor or funder more concrete evidence in your capability as a PhD student. A master's can also be an opportunity for you to focus your studies into a more specific area. If you know you want to a PhD on a particular topic, a master's can give you more specific experience than the general overview you get from an undergraduate degree.

iii. Get Experience

A great way to bolster your application is to get more experience relevant to the sort of work you would be doing in a PhD. The nature of this work will vary slightly depending on your field, but mostly involves research. Especially for science-based PhDs getting a job as a lab technician (even only on a limited contract) massively improves your chances. Experience like this will put you ahead of the crowd by illustrating an above average dedication, knowledge of the field, and understanding of what PhD life will be like.

iv. Wait

It is possible that there was nothing wrong with your application. A supervisor who would have bitten your hand off any other year, may have gotten an offer from an unusually outstanding candidate at the same time you applied, or you may have had an off day at the interview and know that you didn't do yourself justice. If this is the case, you likely are already aware of it (through personal experience or from interviewer feedback). It can't do

any harm to improve on your application, but it is also perfectly possible for an essentially identical application to do better in one year than another.

3. Try again further in the future

This is especially relevant for applicants who have only just finished their undergraduate degree but applies to everyone. There is no age limit for a PhD. In fact, people who go into a PhD straight from the third year of their undergrad are in the minority of PhD students (and in many supervisor's opinions have a tougher time of their PhD in the long run). In many countries including America, Canada and South Korea the average PhD student graduate is in their 30s, and even in the UK (which has one of the youngest average PhD ages in the world) it is still very common to see PhD students who have had many years of experience before taking on their doctorate. There is no reason why you must do a PhD as early as possible. Having now had the experience of a failed application, take time to reflect on your next steps, for a lot of people it might make sense to put the PhD applications on pause for a while, get a few years of life experience and then come back to the application if you still think it's worthwhile.

Important Dates

PhDs and PhD funding opportunities come and go all year round. However, a significant majority of funded PhDs follow a similar timeline. The dates below outline this timeline, showing you the best time to be searching for PhDs. This is because most PhD funding comes from a huge governmental body called the UKRI (UK Research and Innovation). UKRI coordinates funding schemes for many disciplines, including engineering, arts, biosciences and economics and although these different areas are managed by smaller, more specific funding schemes, all the money comes from the same source and so the organisation of the PhDs they fund largely occurs at the same time, resulting in a sort of 'PhD season' which is outlined below. To reiterate, these are not the only times to look for PhDs, just the most fruitful for looking for PhD projects that come with funding; you can of course go hunting for PhDs out of season, but if you want the best chance of bagging one it would be a mistake to ignore the dates below.

September – December: PhDs Listings. This is the period when most funded PhDs are listed online. Especially in the middle of this season sites like findaphd.com are updates regularly, so check back every week. This is the time in which you should be identifying potential projects, contacting supervisors and preparing your written application.

November – February: Written Application Deadlines. Each application will have its own deadline for the written application, which should be stated somewhere in the listing. However, assuming you're applying for ones in this 'season' the deadline will be around this period, approximately 2-3 months after the listing goes up.

January – April: Interview Dates. As with the application deadlines, the preliminary dates of the interviews should be listed in the PhD listing, but you can expect the interview to come 1-3 months after the deadline.

September – October: Standard PhD start date. A PhD can theoretically start at any time, but most will start at the beginning of the academic year (even those whose application process is not part of the 'season').

2021												
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2022												
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec

Conclusion

This guide is intended to be as informative and useful as possible to UK PhD applicants. As a freely distributed online document it has the capacity to continually change and develop. If you have any additional questions not answered by this guide, or if this guide helped you get a PhD, I'd love to hear your feedback and you can email me at: bsamwa@leeds.ac.uk or find me on twitter: [@al_wakeman](https://twitter.com/al_wakeman).