

Navigating doctoral studies in UK

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Housekeeping

- Interactive – please raise hand or type questions into chat. If you have a question, it is likely that others have the same question!
- You can also interact through reactions if something resonates with you!
- Please keep yourself muted if not speaking, as it reduces background sounds for everyone
- Videos on, if possible for you, as it helps build engagement
- Take a moment to check if you have something to take notes (digital/paper)

To what extent are you interested in pursuing a PhD?

**Which country/ies are you thinking of
for a PhD?**

What is a PhD?

“an original contribution to knowledge”

Some nice things about doing a PhD

- Academic freedom
- Flexibility in working hours/styles (depending on field)
- Great day-to-day for those who enjoy problem-solving, writing and attention to detail; high intellectual stimulation; high learning curve; variety of tasks; high creativity
- Opportunities to collaborate with brilliant and interesting people
- Have a broader impact (e.g., on policy; advancement of ideas in a particular field)
- Helps with career progression esp. in academia & some other careers
- Is basically funded training!

Some not-so-nice things about doing a PhD

- Takes a longer time to be well-paid; takes a longer time to reach “work”
- Academic hierarchies and power dynamics – a good PhD experience is fairly dependent on having a good supervisor.
- Depending on work culture in the particular university/department/research group, can lead to burnout and high load of work
- “Publish or perish” makes a lot of the work about academic advancement rather than true impact – the academic “ivory tower”. High achievement orientation environment.
- The higher up in academia you go, the more “management-y” the job becomes

PhD models in different countries are different

(Pure
Research)
PhD

e.g. UK,
Europe

Funding more commonly available for international students
No license to practice (unless you have another degree that confers you a license)

Psy D aka
clinical
doctorate

e.g. UK,
Europe

License to practice
Funding much less common for international students
Not as research focused; has placements

Scientist-
practitioner
PhD

e.g.
US, India

License to practice
Research focus as well
Confers both skills
Usually longer (e.g. 5-7 yrs in USA)

The UK Research PhD

Formal eligibility: usually undergrad degree in a somewhat related field (no masters required although rare to not have masters) + English language knowledge

Informal eligibility: (demonstrable) knowledge of subject area; experience in research (preferably in that area); good writing skills; involvement in a paper publication*; good Masters degree; good references; to some extent, access to context-specific experience

Funding pathways for international students

Pure Research
PhD

Supervisor
advertises funded
PhD with predefined
topic

Student contacts
supervisor with
research idea

Rotation-style
programs (no
predefined
supervisor or project)

Sponsored by an
industry
/government/charity
partner

Contact supervisor
Apply to PhD

Apply to PhD
Apply for funding separately
(PhD studentship/scholarship)

Apply to PhD
?Perhaps contact
potential supervisor

Varied

What is funded?

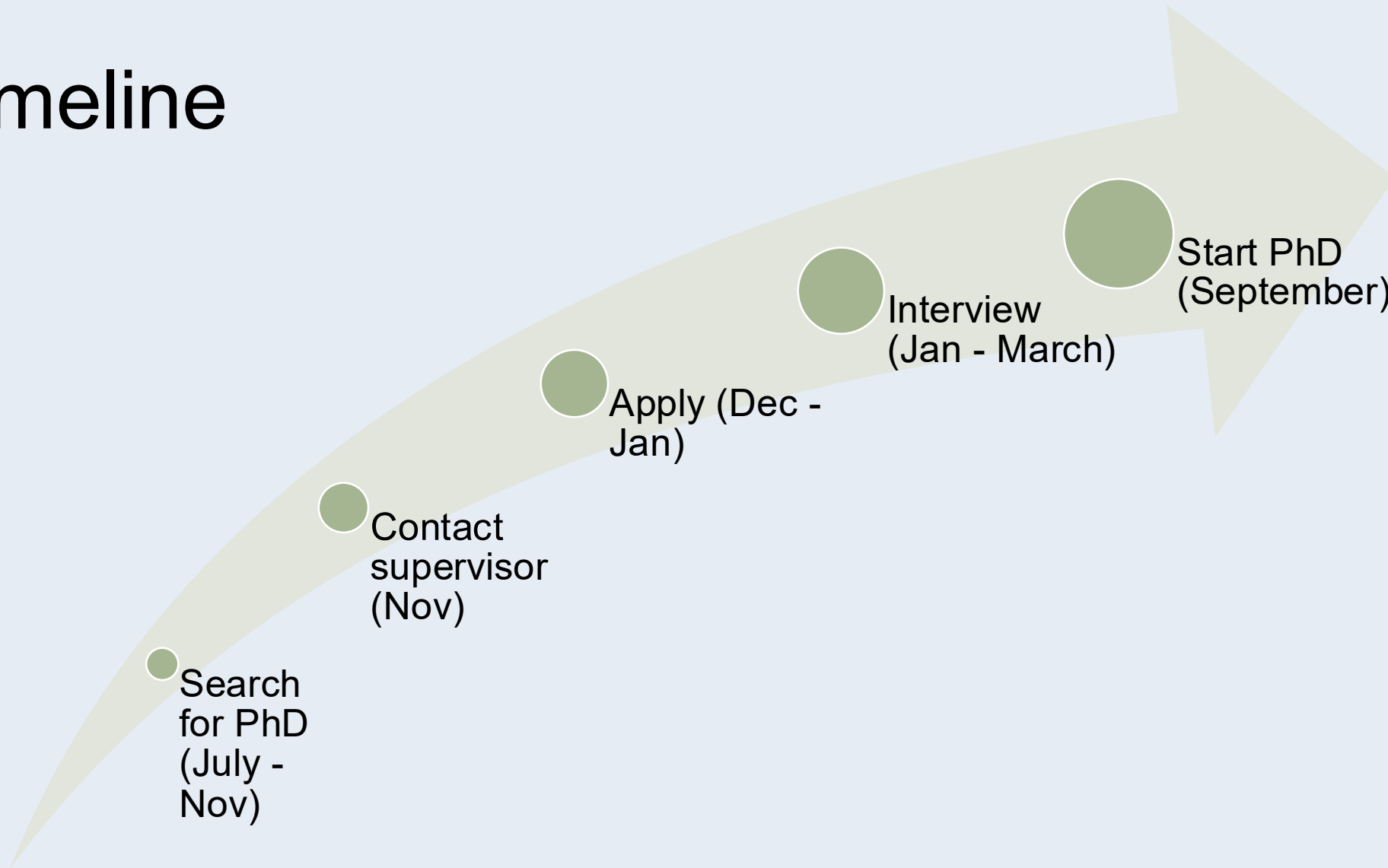
Almost always: UK tuition fee or “home” fee; tax-free stipend for 3 or 4 years (UKRI rate: £20780/year out of London; £22780/year in London)

Usually: International tuition fees

Hopefully: Visa fees; immigration health surcharge; relocation expenses; research expenses aka “bench fees”

Sounds great, sign me up?

My timeline



Illustrative example; timelines
often vary a lot between universities and programs

Look for PhD opportunities

- [Jobs.ac.uk](https://jobs.ac.uk)
- University websites (MRC/ESRC/SeNSS DTPs)
- X / Bluesky

Choosing what & how many to apply for

- Quality over quantity!
- Even one application takes considerable time so if you do more than one (like I did), take this into account
- Decision-making at end if you get more than 1 offer

Choice of university does matter

- Quality of PhD training in part depends on the resources available (people/materials)
- Choice of subject also matters
- Career post PhD is also helped by a good university
- Good university → for the specific subject you want to study
- Basic checks: rankings; quality of website; description of PhD program; check Google scholar profiles of the professors

Contacting the supervisor


Dear Professor X,



Address correctly

I am Ritika Chokhani, a psychologist from Mumbai, India. I am very much interested in your research outline of a PhD project on TITLE here and I am writing to introduce myself and to check with you if you'd be open to discussing further about the project and my potential fit to the project.

I have completed an MSc in Developmental Psychology & Clinical Practice from UCL (on the Dean's List for outstanding academic achievement) and an MPhil in Clinical Psychology from NIMHANS, India. I have an experience of over 4 years in working with children and families with mental health and neurodevelopmental concerns and in the past 2 years, I have been doing this while also taking up part-time research/writing opportunities. I would like to make the transition to a full-time research career and doing a PhD seems like an excellent route for the same.




Give short background to yourself



Write SPECIFICALLY about why project appeals +
what YOU CAN BRING to the project

I am highly interested in your research outline because it aligns very well with my core research interests (intervention research in the area of child and parental mental health). Having a background in working with children and their parents, I have seen firsthand how parents' mental health concerns are critical to their child's mental health and have sometimes had to learn this the hard way, hence the aim of the X clinic really appeals to me. In the proposed project, I am particularly excited by the prospect of being involved in diverse applied research projects involving interacting with clinicians, doing a qualitative study with parents, investigating the relationship between parents' and children's mental health and evaluating a digital intervention. I believe I can be a good fit for this project due to my background and interest in child and parental mental health, my experience in working directly with this population as well as my experiences of working in various mental health services (including a honorary placement in the NHS for a year), which I believe helps me anticipate the difficulties of, but also thrive in, conducting research in a busy clinical setting.



Do mention your ideas on funding/how you plan to
fund it!

I am unsure if the project is funded, but if not and if we take this further, I would potentially like to apply for the X Doctoral Research Studentship and/or a Y studentship. Would you be willing to talk to me further about the project and my potential fit? I am attaching my CV for your perusal. Thank you so much for your consideration in the midst of your busy schedule.

Warm regards,

Ritika Chokhani



Ask for a face-to-face meeting (usually online)

Personal Statement/Research Statement/all the types of statements

- Read the eligibility criteria carefully – they are marking you against this!

PowerPoint Slide Show - [ApplicationWorkshop_Thurs0302]

Attributes of a good health sciences researcher

- Curiosity and critical/analytical thinking
- Initiative and innovation
- Enthusiasm for health, medical or veterinary research
- Determination and commitment
- A collaborative and open approach
- Good communication skills

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PowerPoint Slide Show - [ApplicationWorkshop_Thurs0302]

Evidence of these attributes

- Determination and commitment
 - Excellent academic achievement within your degree *
 - Prizes ** and scholarships
 - Seeing a significant project through to completion **
 - Leadership and teamwork **
 - Resolving challenging situations, overcoming adversity **

** We are much more interested in how you achieved in your chosen degree programme than which university you attended.*

*** These experiences may be from outside academia*

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<https://www.bristol.ac.uk/study/postgraduate/visits-open-days/online-events/sessions/>

Personal Statement/Research Statement/all the types of statements

- Evidence of your writing skills – how you write to answer a question. Make it clear and specific

PowerPoint Slide Show - [ApplicationWorkshop_7Nov2022]

Evidencing motivation and interest

 <p>"Growing up on a farm, I developed a strong interest in veterinary research as I saw many of the challenges created by animal disease. I wrote my UG dissertation on 'One Health', describing..."</p> <p>"My undergraduate dissertation on sudden cardiac death sparked a real interest in electrocardiography and ion channel genetics."</p>	 <p>"I have a passion for veterinary research."</p> <p>"I am really interested in heart disease, and hope to be a leading researcher in this field."</p>
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Personal Statement/Research Statement/all the types of statements

PowerPoint Slide Show - [ApplicationWorkshop_7Nov2022]

Evidencing specific interest

 <p>"I spoke with Prof XXX and was really interested by their work on..."</p> <p>"The YYY group has published some really exciting research on..."</p> <p>"I am particularly keen to work within the ZZZ centre, and have spoken with two potential supervisors..."</p>	 <p>" " (i.e. nothing specific in the application!)</p> <p>"I want to come to Bristol because it is a world-leading research organisation."</p> <p>"I am keen to work with the esteemed professors in your excellent institution"</p> <p>"I am interested in population health science"</p>
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Avoid being generic!

PowerPoint Slide Show - [ApplicationWorkshop_3Nov2022]

Evidencing experience and skills

 <p>"During my masters project I analysed RNA-seq data from breast tumours to identify up-regulated genes..."</p> <p>"I developed experience using Python by participating in the Kaggle competition "HuBMAP + HPA", which aimed to identify and segment functional tissue units..."</p>	 <p>"I have experience with SDS-PAGE, ELISA, PCR and RNA-seq."</p> <p>"I am familiar with R, STATA, Python, C++ and Linux."</p>
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Application Tips

- Many units will do a zoom session/info session – often recorded as well
- Would HIGHLY recommend to attend this/watch this as they say exactly what they want. Email them to ask for recording if you can't find it. Can email to ask clarification questions.

Interview Tips

- Research the panel
- The internet is a gift: look on blogs/websites around the program/university/academics
- Use shared language – mentalize the interviewers & if you're saying something context-specific, explain that

**The systemic context of doing a
PhD in the UK right now**
Or perhaps, anywhere abroad

Some migrants to face 20 year wait for settled status

The silver lining!

- PhD – 3 years of post-study visa (currently)
- Academia more open to sponsoring work visas + less barriers
- Research is typically considered more "international"
- Possible to get Global Talent visa as a researcher

Other recommended resources

- Extremely useful blog post:
<https://diverseacademia202.wixsite.com/my-site-1/post/int-grad-apps>
- ESRC funding overview:
<https://www.findaphd.com/guides/phd-study-in-uk/esrc-funding>
- <https://kcl-mrcdtp.com/apply/projects/> (example of a Medical Research Council-funded Doctoral Training Program at King's College London)