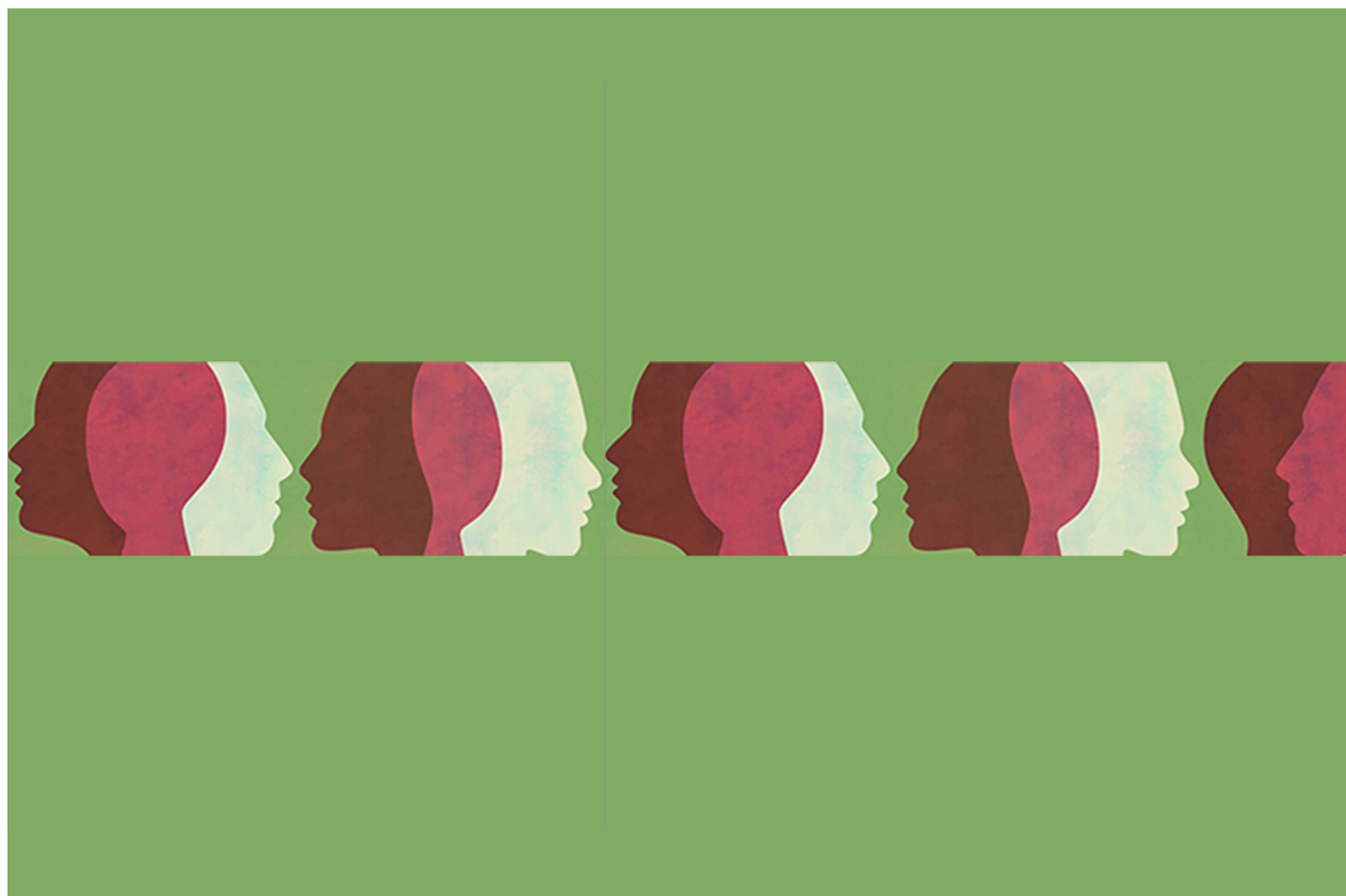


Applying to study for a PhD in psychology



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Contents

Session 1: Why do you want to do a PhD in psychology?	4
Introduction	4
1 Taking forward a career in psychology: some options	7
2 Checking your expectations: the PhD skillset	9
3 Finding your starting point: a PhD research area and topic	16
4 Understanding the application procedures	18
4.1 Step 1: Finding a supervisor	20
4.2 Step 2: Formal application procedures	21
4.3 The funding step	21
5 Self-appraisal activity	24
Session 2: Beginning the process	27
Introduction	27
1 Consider necessary life changes	29
2 Plan your schedule	30
3 Online searches	31
4 Preparing an initial PhD proposal	32
4.1 Thinking through your proposal	33
5 Writing the research proposal, CV and application letter	35
5.1 The research proposal	35
5.2 The CV	36
5.3 Covering letter and application form	37
6 Preparation for an interview	38
6.1 What do the interviewers want?	38
Conclusion	40
Acknowledgements	40

Session 1: Why do you want to do a PhD in psychology?

Introduction

If you have chosen to do this OpenLearn course, you are probably considering studying for a PhD in psychology, in the near future or at some later point. Here are some possible reasons.

- You enjoyed your previous study of psychology and you'd like to continue.
- You were successful in your previous study of psychology so you'd like to take it to the next level.
- After studying psychology courses led by other people, you now want to work on your own project.
- You want to advance your career in psychology.
- You want to investigate a topic or question that interests you.
- You want to build on experience and expertise that you've already gained, in your work or other activities (for instance, as a community volunteer).

Although all of these are good reasons for doing a PhD, each raises some issues that you may not have considered. Let's discuss them in more detail.

- You enjoyed your previous study of psychology so you'd like to continue. You were successful in your previous study of psychology so you'd like to take it to the next level.
- These can both be described as necessary but, perhaps not sufficient reasons for doing a PhD in psychology. Obviously, you won't want to continue if you haven't enjoyed your previous engagement with the discipline, and in order to be accepted for a PhD you will probably need good results from your previous studies (although work or practice experience can also be taken into account). But the idea of the 'next level' is misleading because a PhD is very different from a taught course at undergraduate or Masters level. It is more appropriate to think of a PhD as a new engagement with the psychology discipline, involving continuities from your previous study (for instance, in the emphasis on reading and academic writing) but a generally different experience and level of commitment ([see Section 2](#)).

- After studying psychology courses led by other people, you now want to work on your own project.
- Your previous study will certainly inform your starting point. For example, you may want to take forward a project that you enjoyed in your previous study, such as your work towards an undergraduate or Masters dissertation. Your interest will motivate you but a PhD is not an entirely solitary or individual project. Throughout your study, you will work with other people.

Your research will be supervised by an academic team who will help you progress. In addition, over the course of the PhD you will join different academic communities. Although your supervisors will assist in this, you will also need to make your own contacts, both with peers and more senior academics. You will learn about ongoing research related to your project and publicise your own research findings, for instance, by presenting at academic seminars and conferences. You may work on a research team and you will be part of a research student community. As the PhD progresses, you may also make contact with people outside academia who have an interest in your research, including potential users of the research findings, and people who will become participants in your data collection.

All of these involvements will be an essential part of your life as a PhD student, and require you to use appropriate social skills to communicate and interact ([see Section 2](#)).

- You want to advance your career.
- A PhD is not the only option for further study in psychology, so you need to decide whether it is the best choice for your own career pathway. It is an additional degree that will certainly look good on a CV, and the skills developed in psychology PhD study will be relevant to employment in many occupations and industries.

In the UK, a PhD is probably most commonly valued as a qualification for an academic career, as a university lecturer or researcher. Some PhD students will already have embarked on this pathway, by working as a research assistant or university tutor. If you have different aims, for instance to work as a practitioner such as a counsellor, it may be more appropriate to undertake occupational training, like a certificate or diploma, or a different kind of degree such as a professional doctorate. [Section 1](#) gives an overview of some of the alternatives and you can find more by looking at the degrees offered by different UK universities. It is also worth thinking about non-academic alternatives. For example, if your main aim is to build on your previous professional experience, you might consider a writing project to produce a publication like a guide or textbook or even a memoir.

- You want to investigate a topic or question that interests you.
- This is one of the best reasons for undertaking PhD study, provided that your proposed research will potentially make an original contribution to psychological knowledge and the discipline. Personal interest is therefore important, but it is not the only criterion.

- You want to build on experience and expertise that you've already gained, in your work or other activities (for instance, as a community volunteer).
- It is sometimes said that academics research themselves, meaning that their choice of research topic is in some way always linked to their own lives. For instance, they may conduct research relevant to a social group that they identify with through their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class etc. You may therefore be considering a PhD that will build on your own life experience. However, this will only be the starting point because PhD research must produce original findings that take forward current academic thinking. You will therefore need to engage with the research of other academics, particularly through reading their work.

In addition, your PhD research will be primarily directed to an academic audience, although you may later communicate the findings to other audiences. This academic focus is an intrinsic aspect of a PhD. If you will find it frustrating, for instance, because you have extensive career experience that you want to utilise, you may want to consider whether there is an alternative way to take forward your interest and expertise (see [Section 1](#), and [Section 2](#)).

1 Taking forward a career in psychology: some options

Psychology graduates have a number of options for further study. This section sets out some of the main university courses and degrees available in the UK. (Other countries offer different degrees, including different arrangements for PhD study.) The details given below are indicative, not final, because the requirements vary from university to university. The summary indicates the period for full-time study but many of these degrees are also offered part-time. 'Postgraduate' refers to any study that requires you to have a Bachelor's degree so, rather confusingly, both taught degrees and research degrees can be described as 'postgraduate'.

Notice that training for practitioners, such as counsellors, psychotherapists or practitioner psychologists (clinical, counselling, educational, forensic etc), may be offered by a university or a different training body. In either case, it will be important to check that the course does lead to a practitioner qualification, if that is what you are seeking. For practitioner psychology programmes this means a training pathway accredited by the British Psychological Society and approved by the Health and Care Professions Council. For counsellors and psychotherapists, it means accreditation by a professional body, such as the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy or United Kingdom Council of Psychotherapists.

Practice-related courses

These may be training courses lead directly to a practitioner qualification, such as an accredited counselling or psychotherapy qualification, or a more academic course (e.g. a Postgraduate Certificate) that is a preliminary to practitioner training but not a qualification for it. Notice that the levels of practitioner qualifications vary: they include, but are not limited to, both undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications.

[You can find extra information about training pathways here.](#) (Remember to open this link in a new window or tab so you can return to OpenLearn when you are ready.)

Taught academic degrees

MSc or MA – Study for a Masters degree usually consists of a combination of taught modules and an independent research project, written up in a dissertation of about 20,000 words.

There is a fixed study programme, usually for one year fulltime or two years part-time. Some Masters degrees are general (e.g. MSc Psychology) while others have a more specific and/or applied focus e.g. Masters in Occupational Psychology. (Unless specified as such, these are not usually a practitioner qualification.)

Professional doctorate

This has elements of both taught and research degrees. The study programme is some combination of taught units, placements and supervised practice, and a research project written up in a dissertation (25,000 – 40,000 words). There is usually a strong focus on practice, and the doctorate will usually be an accredited practitioner qualification.

The length is usually three years full time. Examples include a Doctorate in Counselling Psychology and Doctorate in Educational Psychology.

Research degrees

MPhil in Psychology – The nature of an MPhil varies according to the university. It can be a shorter version of a PhD, in word length requirements and study period, or it can include a taught element. PhD students are often initially registered for an MPhil, then upgraded after one or two years' study.

PhD in Psychology – The focus of this OpenLearn course. In the UK, a PhD is awarded for an original research project, written up in a dissertation of 80-100,000 words. The study programme consists mainly of the research; taught elements are minor. The PhD is not a practitioner qualification.

The allocated period of full-time study for a PhD is usually three years, though many students require extra time to complete it.

A less common version is a PhD by publication, awarded for a portfolio of published academic research (for example, refereed journal articles), with an accompanying commentary or discussion. Because of the publication requirements, in the UK this PhD is usually undertaken only by academics who have already established careers. The period between registration and submission can be quite short (months rather than years).

This is only a brief summary to indicate some of the many possibilities for further study in psychology. You can search for more information on university websites.

2 Checking your expectations: the PhD skillset

This section reviews the skills that you will use in studying for a PhD in psychology. You are not expected to have all these skills at the outset. Although you may already have acquired many of them through your previous study and your life more generally, you will develop others during the PhD itself – as with other educational activities, the PhD will offer you the opportunity to grow and change.

The main purpose of the section is to make you aware of the skills a PhD student uses, not least because this will give you extra insight into what PhD study will involve. The following quizzes invite you to consider different groups of skills, and how you might include evidence of the skills in your application to become a PhD student.

Activity 1 Your skillset

Allow approximately 40 minutes.

Quiz 1: Academic reading and writing

1. Go through the list of skills and grade yourself, then read the reveal.

- Read academic texts (like journal articles) efficiently, to understand and extract the main points.
- Search library catalogues and datasets to find new sources and obtain an overview of an academic field or sub-field.
- Summarise and critique research you have read about.
- Write essays and similar texts to present an argument or claim and support it with evidence.
- Revise writing in response to feedback.

Pick the option that you think reflects your abilities.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



Discussion

This list summarises the main skills acquired in undergraduate and taught postgraduate study. They will be of central importance in your PhD research, particularly in the initial development and the final 'writing up' stage. In addition, you will utilise these skills to produce outputs that present your research to wider academic audiences, such as conference papers and (later) refereed journal articles.

2. How could you evidence these skills in your application?

Discussion

The main evidence for these skills in your application will be your research proposal and other documents that you present, and also the results from your previous study.

Quiz 2: Research skills

1. Go through the list of skills and grade yourself, then read the reveal.

- Develop research questions.
- Design a research study.
- Collect research data.
- Analyse data to produce new findings or interpretations.
- Use the findings or interpretations as evidence to develop and support a novel argument.
- Understand and explain the premises of different approaches to data collection and data analysis.

Pick the option that you think reflects your abilities.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



Discussion

You will also have practised these research skills in your previous study. You will have had some experience designing a viable, ethical research project and developing research questions, probably in your undergraduate dissertation project and possibly also as part of a Masters degree. These will be important skills for a PhD project. Most psychology PhDs involve the collection and analysis of original data so you will need to become proficient in the specific qualitative and/or quantitative method(s) you want to utilise. In addition, you will need to explain and defend your choice of approach and demonstrate your understanding of its underlying premises.

2. How could you evidence these skills in your application?

Discussion

The main evidence you can provide for research skills in your application will be high grades and marks for undergraduate and Masters research projects and dissertations. Many universities require PhD students to have a full Masters in Research Methods, but it may be possible to present other study of research methods (e.g. in short courses and summer schools) as an alternative. Some studentships will fund a Masters as a preliminary to PhD study (Section 2.5).

Many of the other skills that you will need are ones that you will develop during the PhD itself, and there will almost certainly be some training provided.

Quiz 3: Project management

1. Go through the list of skills and grade yourself, then read the reveal.

- Work independently.
- Keep records of your reading and other work, for your own future reference.
- Plan your work and maintain a schedule, with enough flexibility to change in response to new circumstances.

- Be critically reflective about the work you have done, and need to do.
- Meet deadlines.

Pick the option that you think reflects your abilities.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



Discussion

The project management skills relate particularly to managing your own research.

2. How could you evidence these skills in your application?

Discussion

You might cite previous work experience in your application, as evidence that you are already able to be self-directed and autonomous. You might also ask your academic referees to confirm that you have these skills.

Quiz 4: Communication

1. Go through the list of skills and grade yourself, then read the reveal.

Communication with audiences

- Write a Power Point presentation.
- Present to an audience in person.
- Present to an audience online.
- Communicate academic ideas to a non-academic audience.
- Teach about your own work and other areas of psychology.

Pick the option that you think reflects your abilities.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



Communication in groups

- Contribute to a discussion to present an argument or claim and support it, for example, through references to sources.
- Answer questions about your work, explaining points that the questioner did not understand.
- Defend your work, responding courteously to criticisms.
- Accept new ideas and explore their implications.
- Comment on other people's work.

Pick the option that you think reflects your abilities.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



Discussion

You will utilise the skills of communicating with audiences in order to work with other academics, and with non-academic audiences relevant to your research. Communicating with groups will be important when you join your new academic communities, to enable positive and effective discussion and collaboration. These skills will take time to develop.

2. How could you evidence these skills in your application?

Discussion

Again, you might have relevant work experience that you can refer to in your application. If you are undertaking a PhD in psychology in order to enter or advance a career as an academic lecturer, you might already have teaching or research experience that you can cite, and of course experience of presenting at conferences or other similar events will be relevant. For the skills of communicating with groups, you might cite experience of working successfully in academic or non-academic teams.

Quiz 5: Presentation

1. Go through the list of skills and grade yourself, then read the reveal.

Self presentation

- Write a positive account of yourself and your achievements.
- Introduce yourself in person to an audience, with a short positive account of your achievements.
- Contact people you don't know to introduce yourself and ask for assistance.

Pick the option that you think reflects your abilities.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



Digital presentation

- Create a webpage.
- Record a podcast.
- Record a short video.

Pick the option that you think reflects your abilities.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



Discussion

Self-presentation skills are included here because PhD study always involves contacts with other people. In addition to the interaction involved in reading someone else's work, you will get in touch more directly with the authors of papers and other academics whose work interests you, in order to talk to them further. You will communicate with other PhD students. You will contact organisations and research-users outside academia. This kind of 'reaching out' will be part of your learning process.

In addition, contemporary academic contexts are crowded and competitive so you will need to work actively to promote yourself and your research. This may feel uncomfortable, especially if you have previously assumed that good results will speak for themselves. However, self-presentation is an inescapable requirement of academic work.

A further aspect of self-presentation is that as a PhD student you will need to continue to promote yourself and build up your academic profile, in person and online. Maintaining an online presence is an essential aspect of career-building for a contemporary academic and digital skills have become additionally important during the pandemic.

2. How could you evidence these skills in your application?

Discussion

Although, again, there will be opportunities to gain or develop these skills, you will need to utilise some of them in the application process. In the application itself, it will be useful to mention any evidence of relevant media training and/or accomplishments, in your CV and also your covering letter.

Quiz 6: Administrative skills

1. Go through the list of skills and grade yourself, then read the reveal.

- Send and answer emails.
- Read and understand complex regulations.
- Fill in forms.
- Maintain financial records and keep to a budget.
- Write reports.

Pick the option that you think reflects your abilities.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



Discussion

These administrative skills may seem rather mundane in comparison with the others, especially those in the first two quizzes. Nevertheless, as a psychology PhD student and researcher you will almost certainly be working in one large institution, a university, and you may well have contacts with others, depending on your research area (e.g. the NHS, schools, charities). You will need to make formal applications, including for registration and funding, that require careful attention to regulations and

form-filling. One particularly important example in a psychology PhD will be applications for ethical approval.

Even if you become a self-funded student, your project is likely to involve costs (for instance, for equipment and expenses) that require you to apply for institutional funding and manage financial records and budgets. And as your PhD proceeds, you will need to complete reports, comply with institutional requirements and regulations, and deal with the enormous amount of information that is circulated in a modern university. To achieve specific goals, you will have to identify relevant gatekeepers and information providers. All of these aspects of research will require efficient communication, particularly through email.

You will also need to read regulations, fill in forms and engage in email communications during the application procedures.

2. How could you evidence these skills in your application?

Discussion

In your application, you might refer to relevant work experience, in your CV and in a covering letter as evidence of these institutional skills.

Quiz 7: Interview and collegial skills

1. Go through the list of skills and grade yourself, then read the reveal.

- Participate effectively in informal and formal interview situations, as an interviewer or interviewee.
- Maintain positive working relationships with colleagues.

Pick the option that you think reflects your abilities.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



Discussion

General interview skills will be relevant whatever the focus of your PhD because you will need to initiate and lead interactions with other academics and with people from outside academia. These interactions are a form of interview, even if they are not formally described as such. (If you are using interviews as a research method, you will need to justify this form of data collection and also explain the premises underlying your analysis of interview data – these are part of the research skills discussed in Quiz 2.)

The category of collegial skills is very large and inclusive. Everyone has some positive working relationships with other people, and probably some that are more difficult. The relevant point for doing a PhD is that you will not be working alone and in isolation, freed from the requirements to communicate, collaborate, negotiate or be generally sociable. Instead, as Section 1.1 discussed, you will be working with other people, in person or through other media (e.g. written text). All workplaces have a political aspect and sensitivities that need to be negotiated. In addition, research involves conflicting interests, around different academic positions and also in relation to its applications. (This 'impact agenda' is a key aspect of contemporary academic research). You will

need to explain your research, persuade others of its value, and receive disagreement and criticism. You will become part of different communities as you progress. This will be a part of your PhD experience and it will be important to think in advance about how you will manage it.

2. How could you evidence these skills in your application?

Discussion

You can evidence your interview skills in the application process as you will need to present yourself in interview contexts, informal and formal.

Collegial skills are difficult to evidence but you will have an opportunity to evidence them at various points, in your initial contacts with prospective supervisors and in an eventual interview if your application advances. (Session 2 sets out the overall process that includes those stages.)

This section has consisted mainly of a self-assessment of your skills, but in the process you have received more detail about PhD study in general.

It's unlikely that you chose the first option for every item ('I enjoy these activities and I do them pretty well'), but before applying to do a PhD you should be able to choose that for most of the skills in Quiz 1 and 2.

Ideally you chose the first, second or third option for a fair proportion of the skills in the other quizzes. If you chose the fourth option ('I don't enjoy these activities at all') for a lot of the items, it's worth thinking again about whether PhD study is right for you at this point.

The next section turns to the starting point for your own potential PhD, your research area and topic.

3 Finding your starting point: a PhD research area and topic

This section is relatively short because, like most people who are contemplating registering for a PhD in psychology, you probably already have some idea of what you want to research. However, you may not be aware that, as the next section explains in more detail, what you propose to research will in part determine where you apply to do a PhD (i.e. which university's psychology department or school or faculty) and who will work with you as your supervisor(s).

The development of your topic from your first possibly vague idea to your application to study will probably not be straightforward and may take some time. However, there are a few initial points to consider.

Activity 2 Points to consider

Allow approximately 30 minutes.

What kind of psychologist are you?

Discussion

Your previous studies will probably have indicated the area of psychology that most interests you, such as social, developmental, counselling, cognitive, biological, forensic, coaching or occupational psychology (and many more options could be added to that list).

How will you utilise your previous study of psychology in your PhD research on your proposed topic?

Discussion

Think about the modules and assessed tasks, especially research projects, that you completed in your previous degree(s), and the theoretical traditions and previous research that you found most interesting.

Is there an issue or question that you would like to investigate?

Discussion

Research is not purely descriptive. It addresses a question or issue and presents a claim (an answer or solution) supported by evidence. The initial question or focus often changes as the research develops, but at the start of a project you need some idea of the problem you're investigating.

What recent and current psychology research relates to your possible topic and investigation?

Discussion

Although you will address this question in more detail when you begin your actual PhD research, at this point you need some broad familiarity with what is happening in the area you propose to enter, in order to understand how to move forward and, eventually, make an original contribution to current psychological knowledge. Remember that a PhD project will always be 'of its time': a question or issue that was worth investigating ten or twenty years ago would now need to be substantially modified, to take account of subsequent developments in theory and research.

What research methods do you intend to use?

Discussion

Think about the different methods of data collection and analysis that you have previously encountered, both qualitative and quantitative, and the different theories of people and the social world that underlies each of them. There are significant differences between, say, an experimental approach that assumes predictable behaviours, an interpretation that adopts the psychoanalytic concept of the dynamic unconscious, surveys and general qualitative approaches that assume that what people say (or write) provides a reliable indication of their views and likely behaviours, and critical discursive approaches that propose a more complex relationship between people and their language practices. The approach you adopt will probably follow in large part from your proposed research area, but you will need to understand its premises.

Is there an academic or group of academics whose research you are familiar with and would like to become involved with?

Discussion

You will follow up these names when you begin to search for prospective supervisors (see next section).

Does the research you propose potentially have applications or uses for people outside academia, such as a particular community, or people facing a common problem?

Discussion

This kind of larger relevance is generally referred to as 'impact' and is an important aspect of contemporary academic research. Your PhD proposal, and any funding application, will be strengthened if it can indicate the potential impact of the research project, including its connection to current issues.

For each of these questions, find answers that interest you personally. A good starting point is likely to be an assignment or research project from your previous study that you particularly enjoyed. Your interests will drive your application and your eventual research. The next section sets out the application procedures that you need to follow.

4 Understanding the application procedures

Applying to study for a PhD is very different from applying for a taught course of study, like a Bachelor's or Masters degree. In many respects, the process that precedes PhD registration is more similar to applying for a job or an apprenticeship. This section sets out one pathway towards a PhD application and then discusses some variations.



4.1 Step 1: Finding a supervisor

You might expect to begin with your choice of university (for instance, the one that is most local to you, or most prestigious). However, psychology is such a wide-ranging field that most, if not all, UK universities cover only a selection of its subdisciplines and research areas, with different specialisms and strengths. Your task will therefore be to locate psychology academics whose research fits with your chosen area and topic, because these are the people who might agree to supervise you. The choice of university will probably follow from the academics who work there (although sometimes a supervision team combines academics from different universities). You might look for a department or school known for research that fits with your interests. Alternatively, you can approach individual academics directly.

When you have identified prospective supervisors, you can send them your qualifications and a draft research proposal for consideration, perhaps after some initial contact by email or even in person (for instance, at a seminar or conference).



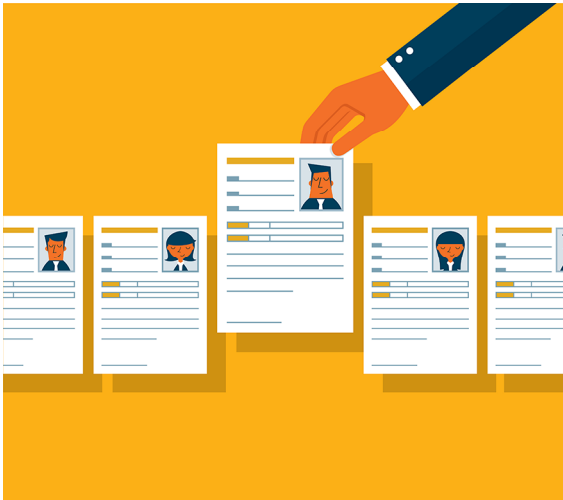
At this point, you may find that the academics you have approached are not available, for instance, because your topic is not close to their current research area or because they are already working with other PhD students. Alternatively, you may be asked for more details or invited to discuss your proposal and perhaps revise it. Prospective supervisors will want to see how the research that you're proposing to conduct will make a positive contribution to their own research areas.

As you see, during Step 1 you are engaged in a relatively informal process in which you take the initiative. It is your responsibility to mark out an area of study and question(s) as a starting point for a PhD, then identify and approach potential supervisors. In effect, you will be saying 'I want to conduct this research and here are the reasons why it's worth doing, and I'm suitably qualified to do it, and you are the academics who can guide me in this research and have a positive experience working with me'.

Another version of this first approach is to send an initial application to a psychology department or school, hoping to be noticed by prospective supervisors. This is probably less likely to be successful but in either situation you will need to present an initial research proposal and a CV (Part 2 provides guidance on writing these). Even if you have strong academic qualifications, your application may not be taken further. You may have to repeat these first approaches several times. Until you find prospective supervisors, you will usually not be able to proceed to a formal application, even if you have a strong CV.

4.2 Step 2: Formal application procedures

Application procedures vary from university to university but there are usually a number of communications involved, including with a faculty or school. When you have found a potential supervisor, you can probably apply formally to the university but there will be shortlisting and interview processes. Unfortunately, the support of a potential supervisor is not a guarantee that your application will be successful.



In addition to academic considerations (for instance, about the number of psychology PhD students who can be supported), at the university level there will be official requirements to be met, for example, in relation to your place of residence and permission to study in the UK. Your previous qualifications will also be checked. .

Most universities offer several alternative forms of registrations, part-time or full-time, self-funded or funded through a studentship or external body.

It is important to note that the application process described so far is usually separate to any application for funding. That will require a separate step.

4.3 The funding step

This step is not numbered because it overlaps with the previous ones. You may have skipped directly to this part of the course but it does not stand alone: you will also need to take note of the information presented in the previous sections, and the previous steps in this section.

Most universities offer part-time or fulltime registration for a PhD. Part-time study is usually self-funded but for fulltime study there are more options. The main ones are:

- self-funding
- funding through a student loan: more information about this can be obtained from GOV.UK
- funding through a studentship offered by a university or another body. Studentships provide funding for fees and a living allowance, most commonly for three years fulltime PhD study although some also include funding for the extra time and fees required to do a Masters. Studentships are usually obtained through a competitive process.

There are many different studentships so it's not possible to cover all the variations. As an overview, they can be broadly divided into three categories.

- The first category of studentship offers an opportunity to do PhD study related to a larger research project led by an academic team. The application process is competitive and requires candidates to provide a CV and also a research proposal, as described in Step 1, with the condition that the proposal will be for a topic related to the larger project. This kind of studentship is an excellent opportunity if your interests fit with the project. There is often more than one studentship available on a project so the successful students will be able to support each other in their studies. If you apply for this type of studentship, the topic area and potential supervision arrangements (and university) are already specified. You will therefore begin the application process towards the end of Step 1, above. You will need to demonstrate that you are suitably qualified and skilled, and you will need to present an appropriate research proposal. And of course the proposal will have to be one that genuinely interests you, because you are applying to work on it for the next three to four years, and possibly longer.
- In the second category of studentship, the research area and topic is not specified, beyond a broad requirement to fit with ongoing psychology research in the university that is offering the funding. To apply, you will go through Step 1, above, in order to find potential supervisors among the available psychology academics. You will then make a further application for the funding with the support of your prospective supervisors.
- In the third category of studentship, funding is obtained from a separate body. The application process will usually be competitive and you will need to go through Step 1 to find potential supervisors, and then present a further, more detailed application and proposal to the external body, probably working with your potential supervisors to polish your proposal. The funding body may have some connection to specified universities, as in Doctoral Training Partnerships funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). (An example is the Grand Union Doctoral Training Partnership between Brunel University London, the Open University and the University of Oxford.) Alternatively, the funding body may be a separate organisation that supports PhD research with a specified focus. (As just one example, the Association of Commonwealth Universities offers studentships on Commonwealth-related themes, funded in association with a journal and publisher.)

For all these types of studentships, there is the possibility that you will find a topic that you want to research and supervisors that you would like to work with, but then be disappointed in the application for funding. It is always easier to obtain funding for some areas and topics than others (the topicality and potential impact will both be relevant

here). It will therefore be important to have an alternative plan, for instance, to self-fund your own study, possibly with the intention of applying for funding again in the future.

5 Self-appraisal activity

You have now almost completed Session 1 of this Open Learn course.

Activity 3 Self-appraisal

Allow approximately 15 minutes.

Answer the questions below to appraise your own readiness to apply to study a psychology PhD.

1. I have good academic qualifications i.e. a good first degree in psychology or a related discipline, equivalent to an Upper Second or higher from a UK university; an MSc in psychology or a related discipline.

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2. I have a research methods qualification (e.g. MSc in Psychological Research Methods) and/or other study of research methods and/or experience of collecting and analysing data.

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3. I have identified a psychology research area, topic and an issue or question that I want to research, and I'm committed to working on that for a number of years in order to produce findings that make an original contribution to psychological knowledge.

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4. I know that doing a PhD will involve a different study experience to a taught degree. I understand what the PhD will involve and I am confident that I will enjoy the PhD experience and can manage it.

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5. I know that applying to do a PhD is a different process to applying for a taught degree and I understand the application process I will have to go through.

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6. I've considered the practical aspects of PhD study, including the financial implications, and I have plans for managing them.

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7. I am confident that a psychology PhD is the best project for me to undertake now, for career and personal reasons.

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Discussion

If you have answered yes to all of the points, go on to Session 2 of this Open Learn course. If you answered no, you are recommended to think again about your plans and perhaps return to the other sections of Session 1.

When you are ready, move on to [Session 2](#).

Session 2: Beginning the process

Introduction

The second part of this OpenLearn course looks shorter than the first but it introduces a series of tasks that will be more time-consuming. In Session 1, you gained some understanding of the PhD study experience, you familiarised yourself with the application process for a PhD in psychology, and you checked that you are suitably qualified. Session 2 assumes that you are now starting on the actual application procedures towards acceptance and registration. The sections in Session 2 guide you through planning and searching, refining your research topic, then writing the documents required in the process and preparing for an interview.

To begin the process, there are several tasks to undertake. These don't have to be done in order, and it will actually be an advantage to work on them at the same time.



1 Consider necessary life changes

Studying for a PhD is a major commitment. Even if you intend to study part-time, doing a PhD will be a more demanding and less bounded commitment than part-time study on a taught course.

Activity 1 Life changes

Think about the following questions and make some decisions, and possibly some notes on what you've decided.

- What changes will you need to make in your life, and are you willing to accept them?
- If you are currently in employment, are you ready to give up your work or reduce your working hours substantially?
- If you have caring responsibilities, how will you manage them alongside your study?
- Are you ready to change your place of residence if you obtain a PhD place at a university in a different part of the country?
- How will you fund your PhD period? Even if you obtain a studentship, you will probably be living on a tight budget. Will you be able to manage financially?

Some similar points were raised in Session 1, but the difference now is that you are making concrete plans.

Provide your answer...

2 Plan your schedule

Most PhD study begins in October, but deadlines are usually much earlier because the application process is protracted, and there will be additional procedures to go through if you are applying for funding. There will be a gap between preparing and submitting an application, and actually starting the PhD. Look at the calendar and decide the earliest date that you might be able to begin, assuming you are successful in all your applications (check [Session 1, Section 4](#) if you're not sure). You may want to consider what you will do if the gap is substantial. Perhaps you can use extra time to build up your application, for example, by improving your qualifications or gaining some relevant experience.

3 Online searches

From now on, you need to spend a lot of time online, searching out details of academics, universities and funding opportunities as well as conducting literature searches for your draft proposal.

A good way to begin searching for possible supervisors is to follow the names of academics whose work you have already encountered, for instance, in research publications. Their university webpages will give details of their current research interests and, often, invitations for contact from prospective students. Look up their co-researchers (on joint-authored publications for example) and their research groups and centres if those have a focus that interests you. Another useful approach is to find conferences related to your interests (British Psychological Society Section websites can be useful) then follow up the names of presenters. If you already have a university in mind, you will need to check whether your proposed research fits into its psychology department or school. Look at the research webpages for psychology and, again, the webpages of individual academics. All of this will take time, but it will help you map out the research landscape in your area of interest.

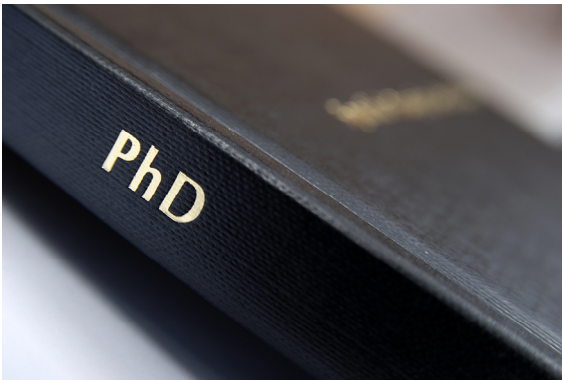
Activity 2 Searching for opportunities

To begin searching for funding opportunities, check jobs.ac.uk regularly for studentships. Look at the British Psychological Society website and university websites for notices about PhD study. Join some of the academic 'lists' that function as noticeboards (e.g. The Association for Narrative Research and Practice assnnarrativeresearchpractice@jiscmail.ac.uk). Search for 'PhD studentships UK', 'Research Council studentships' and 'ESRC Doctoral Training Programmes'. You will probably need to repeat these searches and find new directions to follow. As you continue searching you'll develop an understanding of the possibilities.

While you are searching, you can also begin preparing your initial proposal.

4 Preparing an initial PhD proposal

Developing a PhD application usually takes time and involves a number of iterations, including after discussions with potential supervisors. The process is in many respects contradictory. At the outset, you need to present a strong enough initial proposal to capture the interest of potential supervisors, and if the application proceeds, you will be asked to explain your ideas and plans in interviews and written communications. Yet you are also required to be open to opportunities, such as studentships, and to other research, such as the work of the prospective supervisors. Later, some application forms may ask for additional detail, for example regarding the potential impact and contribution of your project and your plans for disseminating the findings of your research.



Over the course of your PhD study your project will develop so that it is very likely that your eventual topic and research question(s) will be rather different to your starting point. You will therefore need to be flexible, yet have a sufficiently strong interest to hold onto, so that you can work towards completing your own project without being diverted onto other people's projects.

- How can you manage the requirements to be flexible yet committed to your topic and research questions?
- The solution to the contradictions is to think through your ideas and read around your research area and topic. Prospective supervisors will be looking for evidence of this thinking, and of your familiarity with related research and your awareness of the issues that the project raises (there are always some, including ethical issues). You are therefore strongly recommended to spend time 'playing' around ideas, considering different directions and, of course, reading. Go back to material from your previous studies and research projects but also look for recent publications. Google Scholar is often a good starting point, as are academics' own webpages. (If you don't currently have access to a university library, you can usually find pre-publication papers in university research repositories. Also, look for Open Access publications.)

4.1 Thinking through your proposal

Activity 3 will help you prepare your proposal. The following questions are prompts to help with your thinking. (The questions marked with an asterisk will be referred to again in [Section 3](#).)

Activity 3 Thinking through your proposal

Use the following questions as prompts.

1. Where will your proposed research fit within the wider field of psychology? (This is where you can refer to cognitive experimental psychology, forensic psychology and so on.)*
2. What general area or topic will you investigate?
3. What theoretical position informs your proposed research?*
4. What previous research informs your proposed research (including recent and ongoing research)?*
5. What specific issue or question do you want to investigate?
6. How will your research be different to previous research, and what will it contribute that is original (e.g. a new understanding)?*
7. What data collection and data analysis will you conduct? (Your choice of approach will probably be partly dictated by your research area and topic. For example, if most research around your topic is qualitative field research, it will probably be inappropriate to propose an experimental study.)
8. Why have you chosen these approaches to data collection and data analysis?
9. What challenges will you face when you conduct the research? (For example, will you need to obtain extra permission beyond the ethical approval required by all universities? Will you need to obtain or develop special equipment or technological aids? If your research involves human participants, how will you recruit them, and how will you protect them? What categories of people will you recruit e.g. by age, nationality, gender etc? Why have you chosen those categories?)

10. What wider significance will the research have? (Think about applications, impact and topicality.)
11. How will you disseminate the research findings to non-academic audiences? Will this dissemination be part of the PhD project or a potential follow up?
12. What schedule are you proposing? (A common plan for a three-year PhD is to spend the first year reading and developing ideas, the second conducting data collections and analysis, and the third year writing up, but this is very approximate. Your schedule will change but, as with all these questions, it's important to think about it in advance.)
13. Why are you the appropriate person to conduct this research? You might cite your qualifications, skills, previous experience and also your personal identity, for example, as a person of a certain gender, age and ethnicity.

Provide your answer...

5 Writing the research proposal, CV and application letter

The main documents that you will initially prepare for a prospective supervisor will probably be a research proposal, CV and application letter. Later you will need to complete an application form.



5.1 The research proposal

Your research proposal will bring together your thinking about the points covered in [Section 1](#). You may not have space to cover all the points in much detail but your aim is to address an academic reader in order to:

- inform them about your proposed research, including the question or issue you want to address
- demonstrate your academic skills (see [Session 1, Section 2](#))
- indicate the importance of the research e.g. its potential impact
- indicate your suitability as the researcher.

University websites provide specific advice on the requirements for a research proposal. The advice varies but commonly includes the following points.

- The proposal is divided into sections e.g. Introduction, Research topic and focus/ research question(s), Background literature, Data collection and analysis, Potential applications and impact.
- The reference list includes key theoretical sources and relevant recent research
- The length is 1000–2000 words, excluding the references.

This is an initial research proposal and it is likely that you will develop it during the application process, for instance, in response to discussions with prospective supervisors and/or to fulfil the specific requirements of a funding application.

5.2 The CV

A CV is a summary of your qualifications and experience, written in the form of a list, with notes. Like any document, a CV is selective and shaped to its purpose. For your PhD application, the CV should be quite short (probably 2-3 pages) and include:

- full details of your educational qualifications. In addition to the final results (with the class of your Bachelor's degree), you can list previous research projects and dissertations, and also the modules or courses that are most relevant to your proposed research, with the grades or marks you obtained
- any academic work you have done, paid or unpaid, such as teaching or working as a research assistant
- work experience that evidences skills relevant to the PhD, such as record keeping, digital skills, presenting to groups etc. (Look back to [Session 1, Section 2](#)).



Writing a new CV might seem a mundane task but it is worth spending time on. At a later point you will have to provide evidence of the details of your previous study so check that you have the documentation.

5.3 Covering letter and application form

Your initial covering letter (or covering email) can be quite short but should contain a succinct but informative summary of your proposed research project. Take some time to write this, to include the key points that will interest a prospective supervisor.



For your initial application to a prospective supervisor, you will probably not include an application form but at a later point, you will probably need to fill out several forms e.g. for registration and for funding applications. This can be a time-consuming process and you need to pay careful attention to make sure that the forms are consistent with each other, and with your CV and the research proposal. You may include more or less detail on different forms but check that you have made the same claims about your aims, research question, proposed methods etc.

6 Preparation for an interview

The PhD application process is likely to involve you in a number of interviews, ranging from an informal chat on the phone to a formal process with a full panel of interviewers. You are strongly recommended to practise for all of these, with someone else or just by rehearsing alone, speaking aloud.

First, practise summarising your proposed project. If you become a PhD student, you will be frequently asked what your research is about and why it interests you so you need to develop some fluent and succinct answers, even though these will change as the project develops. As a guide, look back to the asterisked questions in [Activity 3](#).

Next, practise answering the following questions. Even if these are not exactly what an interviewer asks, your prepared answers will probably cover most of the ground.

- Why do you want to do a PhD?
- What will your proposed research contribute to psychology?
- How does your previous study (and work) prepare you for it? (This is your opportunity to explain why you are the right person to conduct the research you are proposing.)
- Where do you envisage this PhD taking you in the future? (It's perfectly acceptable to give alternative answers e.g. maybe an academic career and maybe one in industry.)
- What is the relationship between your proposed data and topic? For example, what are you assuming that the participants' talk can tell us about their experience?
- What problems might arise with your proposed data collection (e.g. because of the pandemic) and how will you respond to them? (In particular, if you are planning research with participants, it is important to be aware of potential access problems. Will you be able to recruit the people you want?)
- What are the limitations of this research? (All research has a selected focus and approach: it's doing some things but not others. This is an invitation to say what you won't be doing.)
- What do you think will be the challenges of PhD study? (This is your opportunity to demonstrate that you understand what will be involved.)

6.1 What do the interviewers want?

As discussed above, prospective supervisors will want to be shown that you have your own ideas but also that you are open to developing those ideas, and receptive to guidance. Your research proposal is therefore a starting point for exploration, not a rigid specification. You may be asked about connections to other ideas. If so, be ready to pick up on those and discuss them, not reject them, even you can't instantly tie them to your interests and previous work. (It's perfectly acceptable to say that a suggestion is interesting and you will think more about it, assuming of course that you follow through on that and do think about it later.)



If you are being interviewed for a university place, such as a studentship, be ready to answer explain what attracts you about this specific opportunity. The prospective supervisors and other university representatives will want to know that you want to come to their university and department/school, and have found out about it. Before the interview, your searching should have familiarised you with the specialisms of the academics, especially the prospective supervisors, and you should be ready to explain what interests you about their work and how you see it contributing to your proposed project. Remember that the people who are considering offering you a place will be looking for someone who will join in and be open to teamwork, not a lone genius! Also, if the university is distant from your current place of residence, the interviewers will want to hear that you will be present in the research community (the pandemic allowing) and are not planning simply to take the funding while continuing a separate life elsewhere.

At the end of the interview, you will have an opportunity to ask questions, and this is an opportunity to clarify points you are uncertain about, and also to demonstrate (again) your interest and willingness to contribute (for example, you might ask about opportunities for part-time teaching).

Conclusion

You have now completed this Open Learn course on applying to study for a PhD in psychology. If you have worked through both parts of the course, you may already have begun your own PhD application process. Alternatively, you may have decided that you would like to take forward your psychology studies in a different direction. Good luck for the future, whatever your plans.



Now that you have completed the course, you should be able to:

- understand what studying for a PhD in Psychology entails, and the main differences from study on taught courses like a BSc or MSc in psychology
- understand the qualifications, skills and interests required for PhD study
- make an informed decision about whether to undertake PhD study in the future
- understand the procedure for applying to do a PhD in psychology
- identify PhD study opportunities
- begin to develop a strong proposal that can be part of an application to a university and/or prospective supervisor(s).

Where next?

For more information about applying to study for a PhD in the School of Psychology and Counselling at the Open University, look here

<https://fass.open.ac.uk/psychology/postgraduate-research>.

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